



Paper People by **Kitkat39612**

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Summary: Mileven High School AU. Set in Chicago. Stuck on the edge of terrifying gang violence, the AV Club is trying to lead a normal life. For Mike, that includes trying to get closer to El Hopper.

1. Chapter One: The Other Side

1

Gunfire cracked out through the air.

El Hopper didn't react. Didn't flinch, didn't jump, didn't scream. She carried on scribbling down her Maths homework, pencil scratching across the paper. Once the gunfire stopped, she paused. El guessed it would be five minutes before she heard the ambulance, then returned to the work.

Ms Carrigan had set equations. Equations made El stressed, and if El was stressed, she obsessively chewed whatever she had in her hands. Teeth marks peppered the wood of her pencil, especially around the eraser.

'Expand and simplify brackets,' she read out quietly. $(x+3)(x-4)$.
Dear God, she was terrible at maths. *'Dad!'* El leaned back over her desk chair. *'Dad, can I have some help?'*

Chief Hopper appeared at the bedroom door, tightening his belt. *'Sorry, kid. Have to go out.'*

'The guns?'

'Yeah, sounded like a drive-by. I'll be back soon. And what are our Don't Be Stupid rules?' Hopper pulled on his fedora as El rolled her eyes. Sometimes her dad forgot she wasn't six anymore.

'Don't answer the door to anyone,' she said, counting them off on her fingers. *'Any fighting starts, hide under the bed. Keep a phone with me at all times.'* She pointed at the phone in her room. It was a fairly plain, dull, creamy colour, but El had decorated it with stickers of bands and skulls. *'I'll be fine. What about you?'*

'Yep, I know my rules.' Hopper quickly came over to her desk, peered at the maths problem. *'Just draw lines like this to make it easier to multiply. And remember a positive number and a negative number makes a negative. Okay, I really gotta go.'* Hopper ruffled her curly

hair, and El watched him out of the door. Every time he left, she was so scared he wouldn't come back it was like a physical pain.

An ambulance's siren wailed out down the street. El checked her watch; yep, she'd been right.

Five minutes.

6:25. Monday morning. Mess was spread out across El's desk and room. She'd never been very tidy, but this was bad even by her standards- her origami stuff was pushed to one end of her desk, whilst pens, pencils and books were scattered across the rest of it. Her school books had somehow found their way onto the floor, so El was cramming as many as she could find into her satchel.

`Come on-' She filled her bag until it was almost bursting at the seams, then tugged the zip shut.

Time to get dressed and do her makeup... in ten minutes.

El's `wardrobe' was really a stack of shelves with a sheet thrown over it to act as a cover.

She yanked off the sheet, and grabbed her jeans, black sweater, and vest top before tugging on her jeans, doing little jumps to get her legs in. They were skinny jeans and El, while she wasn't fat, wasn't exactly skinny either- she was just sort of comfortable in the middle, and was perfectly fine with that. El slid on her vest and finally got on her sweater.

She'd be boiling, but it was either that or get dress coded.

The first time she'd got dress coded, her and Max had locked themselves in one of the classrooms and barricaded the doors as a form of protest, a stunt that had ended with the two of them in detention for a month.

Five minutes...

El flicked open her eyeshadow palette and took out the make up brush. It was always a struggle not to get eyeshadow all over her fingers. El put her make-up on in a look she called `Punk-Goth

Racoon.' Once that was done El blinked into her mirror, then for good measure rubbed a little eye shadow into her lips. There. That was good.

Hopper was still asleep from his long night. He hadn't got back until way after El had gone to bed. El quietly opened his door and checked round it, then blew him a quick kiss.

Two minutes.

El grabbed her breakfast from the kitchen. Chewing on her mouthful of cold Eggo, El let herself out of the apartment and locked the door. The key was safe on a little string around her neck.

Jim Hopper owned apartment 24B. The elevator had given up the ghost two years ago, but luckily the apartment was only three floors up. Maybe twenty, thirty feet above the pavement. By the time she was halfway down, her Eggo had dissapeared. El opened the glass door and walked out into the Chicago street. The walk to school was fifteen minutes long. El loved walking about Chicago in the early morning- street vendors were setting up their stalls, people were walking their dogs, TVs were already crackling out news headlines. It was the *energy* she adored. Healthy, human energy, not terrifying adrenaline.

'Hey, Ben!' El shouted, waving to the man who ran the hot dog stand. He waved back at her, still clutching a spatula. The grey-muzzled labrador that hung around the stall for scraps barked at her. Even if El knew it was silly, she still liked to imagine that the dog was barking specially for her.

El carried on her way. The June sky billowed with clouds, but it was still warm and sunny. Soon, she was at the school.

El joined the stream of students flowing in through the gates and broke off once inside, headed towards the outer reaches of the battlefield that was the playground before school started. At the edge of the gum-splotched recess yard was Max, slouched against the pebbledash wall in her yellow hoodie, waiting for El.

'Did you hear about Jess Landey?' Max said immediately, instead of

hello.

`No. What's happened to Jess?'

`Drive-by. Not far from your apartment block.'

The gunshots. El's eyes almost popped out of her head. `Is she okay?'

A redundant sigh escaped Max's mouth as she shrugged. `She's alive, if that's what you're asking.'

The bell went. Both girls were grateful for the distraction. They grabbed their bags and ran to English, carried along with the stream of students.

`So- you did the English homework, right?' Max panted, her black rucksack bouncing on her shoulders. `You know what a git Mr Gruber is about homework.'

El stopped dead. *`We had homework?!'*

Panic pushed El's heartbeat up to about a trillion beats per second. Max shoved El in the direction of the library.

`Go! I'll cover for you with Gruber.'

There was no need to ask El twice- she shot off to the library, grey satchel banging her hip. She pushed her way through the current of students going in the opposite direction. Unfortunately El was only a lowly sophomore, meaning that all seniors and juniors had full permission to try and shove her in the opposite direction.

Eventually El managed to get to the library, after carving a path through the river of people with her elbows. Breaths heaved in and out of her lungs. After a couple of minutes her heart rate returned to normal, and El entered the high school's enormous library. She walked past the librarian at the desk, muttering a half baked excuse at her, and settled down at the furthest end of the library, in a dark, secluded corner almost no one went to.

El pulled her English book out of her satchel. The bottom of her bag was a clutter of food crumbs, books, hand-outs she'd completely

forgotten to stick in her book, and wrapped sanitary towels. She blew food crumbs off of her English book and then opened it. Oh, yeah. Now she remembered the homework. They had to answer a few comprehension questions on *To Kill A Mockingbird*. The questions were in an English textbook that *should* be in her bag...

El buried her face in her hands. She'd left it in her mess of a room.

Don't panic, she told herself. The library would probably have a copy of the textbook in the Reference section. It was right ahead of her, so El got up, and started running her index finger over the glossy paperbacks. She found it right at the other end of the shelf. The *To Kill A Mockingbird* textbook was one of the thickest; it would take her forever to find the right page.

El pulled it out, and saw an eye staring back at her from the other side of the shelf. She almost dropped the book. El stepped back a little, and so did the person on the other side of the shelf, and El saw more than just his eye. Her lips parted slightly.

She didn't know this boy's name, but her heart started beating very, very fast. Her ability to breathe seemed suddenly restricted, and she clutched the book to her chest.

This boy's eyes were a dark, rich brown. El was completely transfixed by them. She could only see a sliver of his face- a vertical line of eye, cheekbone, freckles, and half a mouth. If anything, her heart started beating faster as she imagined the rest of him. The corner of the boy's mouth she could see turned into a slight smile. El was too shocked to smile back. All she could register was the sudden dizzy feeling behind her eyes.

Unwillingly, she turned away, hands clinging to the book even tighter, so tightly her knuckles turned white. It took her a moment to remember where her chair was. When she did remember El sat down, thumbed through the book, and got to the right page. Six questions, all fairly easy. She scribbled down the first one, then the second.

Something weird was happening. El found herself scanning beyond the bookshelf for whoever the boy had been. When her eyes found him on the other side of the library, heat flooded across her face. His sooty mop of hair fell forwards as his hands flashed across the page

of his book. He must be clever; it looked like he was doing his homework at the speed of lightning.

She tried to concentrate on her own homework, but almost against her will, her eyes kept flicking up to catch a glimpse of him working at the opposite end of the library. At one point, their eyes met. El looked back down at the homework as fast as she could, hands trembling.

It was like the rest of the world had suddenly fallen away. Then El checked her watch.

'Oh, *God*-' El took a guess at the sixth question and then started shoving things back into her bag, including the reference book. She was late, she was *so* late...

El heaved her satchel onto her shoulder and sprinted out of the library and down the empty corridor, her entire concious begging her to stay in the library.

When she ran past the row of lockers, she saw that grafitti had been daubed all over them- stuff like *Go home, Texas!* or, *Chicago Dogs, watch your back!* and a few images of dead bodies.

El ignored it, skidded around the final corner, almost ran over a lost Freshman, and finally burst into her English lesson. Mr Gruber gave her a sickly smile, all bushy moustache and yellowing teeth.

'Miss Hopper, how nice for you to join us,' he oozed. 'Care to explain where you were?'

'Oh, well, I was-'

'Miss Mayfield already filled me in. I just want to hear it from you.' A smug, self-satisfied expression took over Mr Gruber's face, like he had thrown a sausage roll into a bear trap, and was very sure El was about to go after it. El gulped, and glanced towards her friend. Max was seated behind Mr Gruber's back, and she seemed to be miming something. Max made the universal sign for a phone, and mouthed nonsensically. Nerves racking her chest, El took a wild stab.

'A teacher rang-' Max shook her head. 'I mean, called me to-' Now

Max was pointing to Mr Gruber's desk. Everyone in the class was struggling to keep a straight face. 'Called me to the teach- to the *front* desk because-' Max kept on pressing her hands to her heart and pulling a weird face. 'My dad is getting married?'

Max buried her face in her hands and flopped onto the desk. The entire class burst into peals of laughter. Embarrassment wormed about in the pit of El's stomach.

'Well, that's odd, Miss Hopper,' Mr Gruber smirked. 'Because Maxine informed me that you were told to go to reception because your grandmother died.'

Oh. El accepted the detention slip with a resigned sigh and sat down next to Max, face burning.

'You looked like a lobster,' Max mumbled, still facedown on her desk. 'You were going redder than I thought was humanly possible.'

'Well, thanks for trying.' El pocketed the detention note and retrieved her book and pen. Mr Gruber was writing on the board, and she needed to take notes.

But all she could think of was that boy in the library.

As usual, Max and El took up their post at the edge of the playground. The normal cacophany filled the air- a sultry blend of conversation, ball games, swear words, and bullying. From where they were, it was easy to see the split factions of the Chicago high school. The new kids from Texas were on one end of the playground, whilst the Chicago Dogs, led by Troy, were on the other. In between them was the sports kids, kicking about their soccer ball, the Bitch Queens that El and Max despised so much, and finally, the outcasts. Nerds, weirdos, the too fat, the too thin. They were the equivalent of the crippled orang-utans that hobbled along the forest floor.

Technically, El and Max would be in that number, with their refusal to conform to high school fashion and behaviour. The thing was, the two girls didn't interact with anyone on the playground, therefore, they were unplaceable.

El didn't know who had come up with the Laws of High School, but she guessed that they were on crack cocaine when they did.

Suddenly a clump of outcasts moved away, revealing four boys. El's breath caught in her throat. One of them was the boy she'd seen in the library, chatting and laughing to his friends.

`What're you looking at?' Max asked cheerfully, following El's line of sight.

`Nothing!'

`Hey, isn't that Mike Wheeler? He's the idiot who blew up that radio in Mrs Hartwell's face two weeks before she retired.'

His name's Mike. `I-I'm sure it was an accident,' El stammered. `And anyway, I don't know who Wheeler is, why would I know who he is? I-I mean, we're all just going to the same school, right?'

A soccer ball thumped into the ground next to them, bouncing loudly off the asphalt and landing in the grass. Max watched El shrewdly.

`You're going red again,' she informed her.

At that point, El wondered how hard it would be for the ground to swallow her up. It didn't even have to be a hole, it could just be a meteor or something that only hit her. The minute Max figured it out, her entire face lit up like she'd discovered the best thing since sliced bread.

`Oh my *God*, you like Wheeler!' Max started laughing so hard her entire body doubled over and then got stuck in that position. Everyone on the playground looked towards them, the jocks, the Bitch Queens, the gangs, and the outcasts.

Including Mike and his friends.

It was then El began to die inside.

Hi. This chapter is the first chapter of a full length fanfiction I'm planning. It will probably be about ten chapters long. If you could write a review telling me what you think of the premise, that would be very useful. As for the actual fanfiction, I'm going

to start publishing the rest the minute I've written the whole thing. There might be a little wait, so apologies in advance. Thanks for reading!

2. Chapter Two: Sirens and Pizza

Hi, thank you to everyone who reviewed, favoured or followed my story. It really means a lot. Thanks to Alikatt for all the help, and to multisabata, as something weird happened with the computing and they pointed it out. All characters belong to the Duffer Brothers.

In the nicer end of Chicago, there was a small, unassuming house. Four windows, a door, hanging baskets. Nothing really made it stand out.

But inside, chaos reigned.

Mike Wheeler, Will Byers, Lucas Sinclair, and Dustin Henderson were in the middle of what looked like the most intense game of Dungeons and Dragons ever played in the history of board games.

`Roll a seven, roll a seven!'

`No, don't cast protection, throw a fireball!'

`The thesselhydra stalks closer-'

`Seven! Seven!'

`Boys!' Mrs Wheeler shouted down to them. `A little less noise, please.' All of them shut up simultaneously. Their current location was the Wheeler's basement. It was fairly roomy, with beanbags, board games, and a desk shoved in the corner. In the centre was a table, with four chairs around it. At it's centre was the board game, figurines balanced on it.

There was a collection of mumbled `sorry Mrs Wheeler's and `sorry Mom's. Mrs Wheeler shut the door.

`The Thesselhydra has run out of patience with your squabbling,' Mike continued, quieter but no less dramatic. `It throws back it's heads and roars-' Mike demonstrated- `and kills you all.'

`Son of a bitch,' Dustin muttered, throwing down his figurine.

`Thought we had him then.'

`So, did you get that maths homework to Woodhouse on time?' Will asked, starting to pack up the Dungeons and Dragons set. `I can't believe you forgot to do the worksheet.'

`Oh, yeah. That,' Mike said nonchalantly, feeling heat rise up his cheeks. `I managed to get it done.' Mike began clearing up the Dungeons and Dragons so vigorously he knocked over his can of coke. Lucas and Dustin jumped up like they'd been given electric shocks, soda all over them.

`Mike!' Yelped Lucas, flapping about his T-Shirt. `Mom just got me this!'

`Sorry! I-I'll get something to clean it up.' Mike sped up the stairs. Just thinking about that girl on the other side of the bookshelf made him feel embarrassed.

As he dug around underneath the sink for dish cloths, Mike's mind rewound right back to the morning. Dustin had suddenly asked him about the maths worksheet Mr Woodhouse had set them on Friday.

`Wait, what?'

Dustin's eyes had gone wide. `The homework he set for *today*, for us to do *over the weekend*. And he said that we'd get a detention if we didn't do it.'

`I can't get detention! Mom's gonna *kill* me!'

Dustin's hands had started flapping like there was no tomorrow, a nervous habit of his that drove pretty much everyone up the wall. Luckily, Will had taken control and kept his head.

`Go to the library,' he said quickly. `We'll say that you fell over on your bike and went to the nurse.'

`Okay, thanks!'

`Quick!'

Mike ran down the stairs and barged into the library through the back entrance so he wouldn't have to risk getting caught by the librarian. He skidded to a halt, closed the door behind him, and made his way to a secluded corner. The desks were covered in anatomically incorrect graffiti. Someone had started to write 'This will be a massive waste of time' in correction fluid; unfortunately, they'd clearly been caught because the sentence died after the word 'waste'. Mike opened up his book and quickly scanned the worksheet; it was his Achilles Heel. Pythagoras' Theorem. Seriously, was Woodhouse *deliberately* trying to kill his will to live?

Mike's eyes flicked to his watch. There was only a short window of time before Woodhouse got suspicious. Thankfully, he knew that the maths textbooks were in the Reference section, on the other side of the library. Mike walked over and started trying to find the book that would be most helpful. Eventually, he found it. When Mike pulled out the thick book, he'd almost let out a gasp of surprise- on the other side, a warm, hazel eye blinked back at him, from the English side of the reference shelf.

Just thinking about that girl's only visible eye made Mike's stomach go all swoopy and weird again. He found the dish cloths behind several boxes of fabric softener, and returned to the basement.

'Here,' Mike called, holding aloft the dish cloths, before tossing one to Lucas and the other to Dustin. Coke saturated the blue material as Mike wiped up the soda on the floor.

'Why were you acting weird earlier?' Will asked.

'Hm? I wasn't acting weird.'

'Yeah, you were,' the three boys replied in unison.

'Really weird,' supplied Dustin, a little over-enthusiastically in Mike's opinion.

'Well, I *did* see this girl at the library-' Mike hedged, refusing to look at any of them. His friends jumped on his admission like prosecution lawyers. After five very painful minutes, Mike buckled.

`Okay, I pulled a maths book out of the reference and she must have taken a book out at the same time because we could see each other through the shelf. *That's it.* I promise.'

Will's eyebrows knitted together. `Hang on, describe her.'

`Uh... she had curly hair, black eyeshadow, dark clothes.' Mike didn't feel that any of his friends would appreciate it if he went on about how pretty her eyes were. `But I couldn't see much of her. Like I said, there was a book case in the way. Why, do you know her?'

`I don't *know* her,' Will replied. `But I know who you're talking about. That's El Hopper, we're in English together. Gruber hates her. Remember that time her and Max Mayfield went on protest against him dress-coding her because he could see her shoulders?'

Mike nodded. He knew two girls in his year had done that, but hadn't known their names. Her name rang between his ears. El Hopper. El Hopper. El Hopper...

`Wait, *Hopper?*' He asked suddenly, two jigsaw pieces slotting together with a little click. `She isn't related to Jim Hopper, is she?'

`Yeah. She's his daughter.'

Lucas grinned. `Imagine Mike having to tell the chief of police that he's trying to get into his daughter's-' There was a muffled thump as Mike's thrown pillow hit Lucas' face.

`I'm not trying to get into anything!' Mike protested loudly. `And I only saw her *once*. Anyway, she'll probably say no if I ask her out.' He stood up, picked up the Dungeons and Dragons box, strode over to the desk, and shoved it underneath.

`Well, there is the end-of-year dance in five weeks,' Dustin pointed out.

`No. Like I said, I'll just get rejected. And even if El *did* say yes, I'd have no idea if she's nice or not because I'd be asking her out solely based on her looks. That's basically a sure-fire way of failing.' But even as he spoke, a small voice piped up in the back of Mike's head... *what if he did ask her out?*

`El doesn't speak that much, but she seems nice,' Will said, reasonably enough. The small voice in Mike's head got stronger, plying him with visions of El declaring her love for him off a balcony, like they were Romeo and Juliet. `Anyway, what's the worst that could happen if Mike asked her?'

Dustin let out a snort. `The chief would literally kill *any* boy wanting to date his daughter.'

And with that, the little voice in Mike's head was killed stone dead.

Uncomfortable silence tingled in the air as the boys walked up the stairs of the basement and into the kitchen. Orange light spilled from the oven, where a pizza was cooking. The cheese bubbled, sank, melted, and burnt.

Dustin smiled. `I love your mom's pizza,' he told Mike.

Suddenly a wail echoed through the air. It was a police siren- no, not only one- Will ran to the window and peered out, as three police cars and an ambulance screamed by. Their lights were flashing, illuminating the dark night. The ambulance followed closely, going at least twenty miles per hour over the speed limit.

`Looks like they're headed west,' Will said nervously.

`Course they are,' Lucas said, raising his hands as if to say `*obviously*'. `Troy's west, those Texas kids are out west.'

Slowly, the sirens faded away, and an eerie peace settled, once again, over Chicago.

There was a loud ping. Mike jumped a mile into the air, as did the others, and then let out a huff of relief. Nothing bad.

The pizza was ready.

The next day, an emergency assembly was called at the school. Mike kept his eyes peeled for El Hopper as the sea of students was narrowed down into the (really too small) assembly hall, but couldn't see her anywhere.

Hey, she was okay, wasn't she?

Fear sparked up in Mike's chest, not helped by the stifling claustrophobia. Will started to nibble his lip. 'This can't be about anything *really* bad, can it? I mean, we're fifteen. Troy or the Texans couldn't have done anything too awful. I'm pretty sure that the Jess Landey thing was just a rumour, they couldn't have got their hands on guns.'

Lucas scanned the crowd. 'I dunno. This is Troy we're talking about. Remember he threatened to kill Cathay O'Hara with his penknife because she wouldn't go out with him?'

They all sat down in the hard, plastic chairs with gum stuck to the underside. Rows and rows of students were sat in the hall. Complete silence took the place of chatter when the headmaster walked in. His face was drawn, and pale.

Principal Sanders' cane clicked against the polished floor as he made his way up to the podium, then flicked on the microphone. For a few beats, all Mike could hear was the principal's rattling breathing coming out of the speakers. That was when Mike began to get really scared. Sanders was a pillar in the school- students loved him, teachers answered to him, he always seemed strong and reliable. Sanders had backed up Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Will when they'd asked for the AV Club to be recognised as a proper extracurricular activity.

Now he looked like a breath of wind would topple him.

'Students, I have something unpleasant to share with you,' he began. 'Joshua Kinney died in the early hours of this morning.' A gasp ran through the assembly. 'He was discovered at approximately eight o'clock last night, and was in a coma for seven hours before his death. I don't need to tell you all what an impact this will have on his family. And I wish I could say we will all be sad at his passing. But we all know that isn't true.' Sanders' eyes flashed behind his round glasses. 'Joshua was one of the students moved here two months ago, after his hometown Saragosa was hit by a tornado. Since then, I have seen disgusting xenophobia displayed by boys from this school who have taken to calling themselves the Chicago Dogs. This form of gang

violence has not only taken Joshua's life, but has left Jessica Landey in hospital. And I do not doubt there are many incidents that I know nothing of that happened outside of school.'

As the principal continued to speak, it was like a cloud of smoke was hanging around Mike's head- Josh Kinney was dead.

They'd been sat next to each other in biology for the whole of last term. Josh had seemed pleasant enough. Mike had helped him in a test, and Josh had repaid the favour with an ice-cream sandwich.

Mike noticed his leg was jiggling up and down reflexively, and turned his attention back to Sanders.

'I ask each and every one of you, as my students, to consider your actions and your morals. If this gang violence continues, it will only result in more deaths, more kids in hospital, and before long, even students who aren't involved in any gangs will be affected.' His piercing eyes swept the assembly. For a moment, Mike felt like the principal was watching only him. 'That's all I have to say. Everyone file out in an orderly fashion, and return to your classes.'

3. Chapter Three: IT Support

3

On the night Joshua Kinney died, Chief Hopper was out for a full twelve hours. He'd left the apartment in a rush at eight o'clock, and returned at eight the next morning.

Yawning every few seconds, Hopper climbed the stairs to his apartment, and stumbled his way down to 24B. It took several tries for him to get his key into the lock, but finally, he managed to open the door. Hopper stepped over the threshold, and looked over the tiny apartment.

El was at the kitchen table, her head resting on her folded arms. Five empty cups were next to her; Hopper looked inside. Coffee dregs rested at the bottom, and the kitchen light was still on.

How long had El waited up for him?

Guilt hollowed out Hopper's chest, and he gently scooped his daughter out of the hard wooden chair. El didn't stir- her head flopped back limply, and Hopper carried her through into her bedroom.

'I'm sorry, kid,' he whispered to her, lying her down on her bed and pulling the duvet up to her chin. He tucked it around her chin, making sure El was warm. There was no chance of him making her go to school. Either way, she was already late.

El scrunched up her face in her sleep, and mumbled something under her breath. It sounded like a name, but Hopper couldn't make it out. He picked his way through the clutter on El's floor, narrowly avoided her rollerblades, and turned out the light. Dark swept over the room; the only light came from the sun, peeking out around and below El's curtains. Hopper stayed at the doorway, watching her for a minute, making sure she was okay.

When El was a baby, Hopper had checked in on her constantly, just making sure she was still breathing. He remembered those early days,

just after he'd found her abandoned outside the police station in that tiny cardboard box. Jesus, he'd barely known how to put a diaper on correctly.

Hopper shut the door quietly. He leaned back against the wall, and pulled his hand down over the scruff of beard. He hadn't had a chance to shave for a couple of days.

That night was the worst night his team had seen in a while. Joshua Kinney was one of the Texas kids, and was mixed up in the gangs, same as Jess Landey. She was the girlfriend of one of the Chicago boys- he forgot which one.

In both incidents, the offending party was roaring drunk, so drunk they barely knew what they were doing.

Why did people buy alcohol for kids, or sell a fifteen year old boy vodka?

Despite how exhausted he was, Hopper didn't want to sleep.

The image of Joshua Kinney's raw, beaten carcass was branded into his eyes.

Hopper took his weight off the wall, shuffled to his bedroom, stripped to his trousers and collapsed back onto his own bed. He let his heavy, leaded eyes slide shut.

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It was biting hunger that eventually woke El up. At first, she'd tried to stay in her dream, but the pangs in her stomach got more and more insistent until finally, she admitted defeat.

El rubbed her eyes as she sat up, and flicked on her lamp. The clock in her room said it was past midday, almost one in the afternoon.

'No wonder I'm starving,' she muttered. El looked down- she was still in her clothes. For some reason, she couldn't recall taking herself off to bed...

Then El remembered the long, caffeine-fuelled night of waiting for

her dad to get back.

She immediately staggered to her bedroom door, wrenched it open, and stumbled into Hopper's room.

Relief flooded her body.

Hopper was spread out underneath his cover, looking for all the world like a six-foot-tall starfish. He hadn't even bothered to shut his curtains, so El did it for him.

'Night, dad,' she whispered, shutting the door. Next, she headed to the kitchen, and saw the cups of coffee were gone.

El took two Eggos out of the fridge and slotted them into the toaster.

Glass-

Milk-

Plate-

pop. Her waffles sprung up out of the toaster. El put them on the plate and took a long swig of her milk, before wiping her mouth. She devoured the waffles in sixty seconds flat, then, after a moments thought, put two more into the toaster.

While she waited for them to warm up, El walked between the kitchen and the living room, alternating between drinking her milk and watching Sesame Street. Max thought it was weird to like a little kid's programme, but El disagreed.

Those 'little kid' programmes made her feel safe.

Once El had eaten her second breakfast, she was full and at a loss of what to do. Despite her long sleep, she was still exhausted. She drew circles in the air with her feet, randomly pointed her toes, lolled back her head on the sofa.

But after a while, something pulled her towards Hopper's office. To call it an 'office' was a little bit of an overstatement.

The room was a tiny box cupboard that Hopper used for, as El put it,

`brooding mysteriously'.

Guiltily, El checked behind her.

`Sorry, dad,' she said, and opened the door.

The lamp was turned off, so El felt her way into the room and pulled the little string. Harsh light burnt through the dark room.

El almost cried aloud in horror.

Quickly, to stifle it, she clamped her hand down over her mouth. Pictures were tacked onto the walls, photographs.

Jesus.

Josh Kinney was unrecognisable- his face was swollen, bloody, cold and pale. The images were clearly taken in a morgue. His long nose was flat against his cheek, badly broken, and his top lip was so mangled and puffed up it completely obscured the bottom one. Raw, torn, mincemeat skin clung to his cheeks.

Someone's boot print was clearly stamped into his forehead.

El ran out of the room, hand pressed to her mouth.

Somewhere, a mother was wailing over a smooth oak coffin.

0

Wednesday.

Mike craned his neck in the playground at lunch, barely concentrating on what they were *meant* to be doing, i.e trading Lord Of The Rings cards.

Lucas rolled his eyes.

`Wait here,' he said, and got up. Dustin, Will and Mike stared after him, wondering where he was going.

When Mike figured it out, he started to scramble up.

`Lucas! Stop it! No!'

Dustin and Will kept him back. `Don't go up there,' Dustin hissed. `That'll just make it worse.'

Oh my God... Mike couldn't do anything but watch as Lucas marched up to Max, tapped her shoulder, and started to talk.

`Hey, Mayfield. I don't think we've met.'

`No, we haven't,' Max said warily. She glanced back at El. `You're friends with Mike Wheeler, aren't you?'

`Yeah, I am! Could I talk to you? Please?'

For a moment, there was only a wary, heavy silence between the two of them. Lucas sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck.

`Okay.' Max led to the way the bike sheds, after checking no one was shooting up there. She turned around to face Lucas, arms crossed. `So, what do you want?'

`I think that Mike and El should go out.' Cut right to the chase, that's the best way. Max nodded.

`Yeah. She totally has a massive crush on Wheeler.' Both of them turned to look at El, way out of earshot; she was looking mildly terrified. `How do we get them together?'

Lucas' brain started whirring. `Okay, maybe we could engineer it so Mike has to save her from something?'

`No, El's too tough.'

`Make her seem unattainable?'

`That could work...'

After ten minutes of discussing and planning, Max and Lucas had come up with their master plan. Lucas was outlining all the final details as Max nodded slowly.

`-and then that's when we release the dogs,' she finished. `What could go wrong?'

Behind them, Will was having what seemed to be a very forceful conversation with Mike. Mike shook his head violently. Rolling his eyes, Will grabbed Mike's elbow, and dragged him across the grey, seething playground.

Blinking quickly and looking quite scared, El turned to look at them. Will smiled at her.

`Hi, this is Mike,' he said cheerfully. He pushed Mike next to her and then walked away.

Panic immediately restricted El's chest. She willed herself not to go red, despite the prickly feeling spreading all over her.

Mike was in front of her Mike was in front of her

`Hi,' she stammered out, looking anywhere but at him.

`Hi,' Mike replied. `Um... nice weather, huh?'

Both of them looked up. Thick, marshmallow clouds obscured the sun.

`So, did you want something?' He continued.

El swallowed, trying to get her voice and behaviour back to normal. `Yeah, I wondered if-' Suddenly her mind went blank. `If-'

0

Will hurried back to Dustin.

`How'd it go?' Dustin whispered eagerly.

`I don't know.'

They seemed to be talking, but Mike's feet were shuffling. Both boys knew from long years of friendship that meant he was *I'm-about-to-vomit* nervous.

`So what's happening up there?'

`Jesus!' Dustin jumped a mile and saw Max standing behind them. `Shit, Mayfield. Are you trying to give me a heart attack?' She ignored him, and carried on watching El.

`They seem to be hitting it off,' Lucas said hopefully. `Wait, is she- is she giving him her number?'

El was writing on a little slip of paper, then handing it to Mike. A smile broke out on his face.

`Oh, she's coming back- quick-'

Max grabbed a comic off the floor and started pretending to read it, Will and Dustin began exchanging cards and Lucas was left panicking. He immediately lay down on the ground.

`Hey, El, how'd it go?' Max asked cheerfully from behind the comic, which was upside down.

`Lucas? Are you okay?' El peered down at him, looking understandably concerned. `Should I get the nurse?'

`Me? Oh, I'm- fine, I was just... sunbathing.' Lucas stretched out and lay back against the freezing asphalt. `Soaking up the UV. Ya know.'

They all looked up. Another gargantuan cloud obscured the sun, sending them all into chilly shadow.

`Okay,' El said nervously. `Well, I gave him my number.'

A cheer broke out from the four of them. But El wasn't finished. `I gave him my number, but I maybe- panicked a bit. So he thinks I need technical help because my radio's broken. *Look,*' she pushed on through the annoyed noises. `I'm perfectly happy with being his friend, okay? Now leave it.'

The bell went, and El walked off, her satchel hanging heavy off her shoulder.

For God's sake, she had acted like a soppy, lovesick Barbie. No way. El Hopper would not succumb to stupid, unbelievable cliches.

She would stay herself.

Like ants swarming in a tunnel, the students began to fill up the corridors. El took out her timetable, getting knocked into a few times, and saw she had Art.

Oh, no...

That was the one class she had with Troy.

Dread topped her up, hot and sick. El made her way to the art rooms, and lined up outside. She didn't even have Max for protection in this class.

Troy's heavy boots came along the corridor.

Here it comes. El took out her book and buried her nose in it.

Troy walked straight past her. El straightened up, shocked, and watched him slump against the wall, playing with a lighter.

The scar she'd left on his forehead was still visible, a red line about the size of her thumbnail.

When Cathay O'Hara had refused to go out with Troy last year in Art, he'd pulled a penknife out of his pocket and threatened to kill her.

In a panic, El had made an immediate, slightly rash decision, and had thrown her soda can at him with as much force as she could muster. The end result had been a lot of blood, suspension, and endless harrassment from Troy in revenge after he'd recovered from his concussion.

Cathay had been moved to a different class.

Since then, El had dreaded her art class, because it just meant a torrent of abuse, spit balls, and, once, Troy had flicked a lit match at her hair. Luckily it extinguished itself before it could hit her.

Now, her tormentor was slumped against a wall, looking like he was about to cry.

El bit her lip.

`You okay?' She called over to him, against her better judgement.

`You in with the Texans?' Troy asked her, his mouth twisting around his braces.

`Doesn't matter if I am or not.'

`Fine. If you see the Texans, then you tell 'em they'd better watch their backs.' Troy's face was screwed up in vicious hatred. El took a step back. `They kill my mate, I kill ten of 'em in return. Got it?'

Before El could form any sort of response that wasn't running away or telling someone to lock Troy in a room with soft walls, the teacher showed up and started to herd them into the classroom.

El sat down in her desk, his words milling repeatedly through her mind. Had the Texans killed James?

Jesus. If they had, shit was well and truly about to hit the fan.

4. Chapter Four: Waffles and Milkshakes

4

Mrs Wheeler was worried about her son.

Her eyes tracked his progress across the landing; he was pacing up and down in front of the phone, muttering to himself and clutching a slip of paper.

Was he sick?

`Ted?' Karen called, half glancing down the stairs. No response. `Ted!'

There was a loud snuffle, like a pig waking up from a long sleep.

`Yeah?' He yelled back.

`Come up here.'

`Why?'

`Now.' The baseball game stopped, and Ted Wheeler heaved himself out of his LaZboy and up the stairs. When he arrived, Karen glared at him, then motioned to Mike, who had picked up the phone and looked like he was about to dial. Ted's eyes flicked back and forth in his paunchy face as he tried to see what the problem was. Helplessly, he shrugged in the face of his wife's ire.

Mike's index finger was tapping repeatedly over the `3' key. Karen threw up her hands and walked down the stairs.

Ted's mind was still reeling as he tried to understand what he was meant to do, and eventually came to the conclusion that wives weren't worth the trouble, and that he was missing the baseball game.

Mike didn't even notice they were gone. His stomach was churning unpleasantly.

`Come on, Wheeler. Stop being a moron,' Mike told himself and,

before he lost his nerve, tapped in the phone number El had given him. The dialling tone blared into his ear as he waited.

There was a click.

'Hello?' El's uncertain voice came down the line.

'Hi, El. Um, it's Mike.'

'Oh! Hello.'

'I'm just phoning about the radio. Do you want me to come over, I don't know- Saturday, maybe? Are you free then?'

'Yeah. You can come round at eleven, if you want. Thanks.'

Mike twisted the phone cord in his fingers, already feeling nervous.
'Cool. So, I'll see you at school.'

There was a small laugh. 'Yeah, see you at school.'

Neither of them knew when to hang up, so there was quiet on the line for a minute or so.

'I should hang up.'

'Yeah, good idea. I have some homework, anyway.'

'Okay. Bye.'

Mike hung up and immediately whacked his head against the wall. Oh, God. He was pathetic.

0

It was hideously early.

Mike's alarm drilled into head, like a determined woodpecker. Why had he agreed to get breakfast at a diner with the rest of the Party?

It was *June* and still dark outside.

The alarm was refusing to shut up, no matter how many times Mike whacked it. Eventually he just picked it up and shoved it underneath

a pile of blankets.

At least it had woken him up.

Stretching and yawning, Mike climbed out of bed. He brushed his teeth, washed his face, and threw on his jeans and a shirt which he'd spilt juice on the day before.

As quietly as possible so as not to wake up the rest of the house, Mike unlocked the front door and walked out into the early-morning Chicago foot traffic.

There was a Sixties-style diner around twenty minutes away from Mike's house. Dustin had been soliloquising over the waffles they served there for weeks, and eventually everyone else had agreed to go.

Yellow sunlight crept first in between the tall skyscrapers, and then over, creating warm, golden fingers across the cold pavement. Mike did have to give it to Dustin- Chicago at dawn really was beautiful.

Dustin had given him barely any directions, so Mike had been expecting to wander around for a while before he eventually located the diner.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

The diner was painted a lurid yellow, with a large menu advertising it's food options, and from inside, Mike could hear the faint sounds of Elvis Presley.

On either side of the diner was a laundrette, and a florists.

Mike looked in the large, rectangular window and saw Dustin, Lucas and Will already at a table. He opened the glass door and went in.

Immediate decade whiplash was the only way to describe what Mike went through when he stepped over that threshold.

Black and white tiles, red walls, stools, milkshakes, jukeboxes, and the American flag jumped out at Mike like an over-enthusiastic employee at a haunted house.

`These waffles had better be amazing,' he told Dustin firmly as he pulled out a chair and sat down at the table.

`I know it can be a bit garish when you first see it, but trust me, it'll be worth it.'

A waitress came over to them, her skimpy dress and apron matching the floor tiles. She held four menus. Mike saw her name tag read `Denise', in swirly calligraphy script.

`Hey, Dustin,' Denise smiled, handing out the menus. `How's Mews?'

`He's fine. Have you got your apartment yet?'

Denise shook her head regretfully. `Nah. Bank's saying my mortgage can't be approved.'

Dustin sighed sympathetically.

`Don't look too sad about it, I'm not looking forward to having to kill cockroaches with my bare hands... Your usual?'

`Yes, please. What do you guys want?'

Mike quickly scanned the menu, and his eyes fell on the waffles Dustin claimed were so amazing. `Waffles, please. And a strawberry milkshake.'

`Same for me,' Will nodded, handing back his menu.

`And me,' Lucas added.

Denise smiled. `Coming right up.' She left, her skirt swishing. Elvis stopped singing `Jailhouse Rock' and a Beatles song took it's place.

Well shake it up baby now...

Twist and shout...

The song was accompanied by the serene sounds of truckers swearing and waitresses screaming orders at the chefs.

Their drinks came first.

Mike pulled the tall milkshake glass close to him and took a small sip. *Wow*. It was good.

‘So did you three hear about James Turner?’ Mike asked, taking a long, long slurp.

‘Troy’s second-in-command?’

‘Yeah. Apparently three of the Texas kids got hold of him and knifed him on Tuesday. Someone in my Electrics class told me yesterday.’

Immediate silence fell across the table. Will blinked down at his milkshake. ‘Wow,’ he said limply. ‘That’s... Troy’s going to kill all of them.’

Dustin shook his head so violently his cap flew off. ‘No. I put an *immediate* veto on discussing the gangs. It’s all anyone talks about at school, and at the moment, I just want to enjoy my waffles without worrying we’re all gonna get caught in a drive-by like Jess. Okay?’

On queue, Denise arrived with four plates balanced on her arms. Deftly, she slid them onto the table.

‘Enjoy your meals,’ she smiled, before sashaying away again.

Mike looked down at his waffles. Golden syrup had been drizzled over it in a smiley face, and a pitcher of maple syrup squatted on the table next to the ketchup bottles.

Here goes.

Mike took a bite out of the topmost waffle.

‘Oh my God, that is delicious.’ He swallowed some more. ‘Dustin, I take back everything I said about this being a waste of time.’

Lucas looked like he was having a similar reaction, whilst Will was busily drowning his own plateful in syrup.

‘Wanna race to school?’ Dustin asked as they sprinted out to their bikes, running way behind schedule. Mike threw his leg over the saddle and started to weave around the foot traffic.

`Winner gets the loser's comic book!' He shouted over his shoulder.

`No way!'

They all arrived at school disheveled, a good ten minutes late, and feeling perfectly happy. Especially Lucas, who had victors pick from all Mike, Will and Dustin's comic books.

0

Saturday dawned, bright and early.

El Hopper wasn't there to see it.

She'd been awake most of last night, so slept right through the racket the birds were making and the sun shining through her thin, useless blinds. Screaming. drunken whooping and gunshots had echoed out through west Chicago, keeping everyone up. It had stopped at around three a.m., so understandably, El had a bit of a lie-in.

When she eventually did wake up at ten thirty, the first thing she saw was a hand-written note from Hopper:

Didn't want to wake you. Food is in the fridge, don't be stupid. Love you.

El smiled at it, folded it carefully, and stowed it in the shoebox under her bed. The shoebox was filled to the brim with notes.

She stretched and looked around her room. The night before, El had finished enough origami flowers to fill a vase; they were on her desk in a toothbrush holder.

El climbed out of bed in her pyjamas and made herself some breakfast.

An odd, niggling feeling was in the back of her mind. She felt like she'd forgotten something-

No, it was Saturday. She couldn't have.

El flicked on the TV. The news played in the background as she sprayed whipped cream into a light, fluffy mountain on her Eggos.

`Severe gang conflicts-'

Maple syrup, maple syrup...

`Short gunfight-'

Ah, it was behind the ketchup.

`Two dead-'

El happily lashed sticky syrup over her warm Eggos. Already the cream had started to melt a little. Once her breakfast was covered in drippy golden goodness, El flopped in front of the TV, switched channels to a documentary about cats, and took a massive bite of her breakfast.

El usually slept in an old band T-Shirt and a pair of black sports shorts that were really too short for her. Her hair was unbrushed and a total mess and to be honest, her breath didn't bear thinking about.

Well, it was the weekend. El Hopper was going to sit back, relax, and enjoy her breakfast.

The buzzer went. *Dad's forgotten his key*, she thought.

El stretched and put her Eggo between her teeth, before going to let Hopper in. Then she froze. *Don't be stupid*. El swallowed the remainder of her Eggo and then peeked out of the window, making sure it actually *was* Hopper.

Mike Wheeler was waiting in the street, holding a chunky rucksack.

`Oh my God!'

She dithered for a moment then pressed the intercom. *`Hello?'* El squeaked.

`El, it's Mike. About the radio. Remember?'

Stall him, stall him...

`Come on up.'

WHAT?

El unlocked the door for Mike and then ran into her room, wiping syrup from around her mouth.

El began to randomly throw clothes out of her wardrobe whilst simultaneously running her fingers through her hair and brushing her teeth.

Mike knocked on the front door.

El yanked on her jeans so vigorously she completely lost her sense of balance. Arms flailing, she fell over and smacked her forehead on her desk.

`Ow!'

The knock came again. `El?' He called uncertainly through the door.

`Yeah, I'm coming, hang on!' El opened the door. Mike smiled tentatively and lifted up his rucksack.

`You needed help with your radio?' Mike was surprised at the change in El. She did seem a bit disheveled and there was a red mark on her forehead, but her chin was up and her eyes were bright and intelligent.

`Yeah, the radio. It's just through here.' Luckily, there actually was a broken radio in the apartment. It had been broken for four years, but Mike was clearly good at AV stuff. `That one.'

`Okay... yeah, I think I can do it.' Mike put down the heavy rucksack and pulled out all kinds of weird tools.

For a moment, El watched him work with interest. Then she sat down next to him. `Can you talk me through it?'

`Sure. So, this bit here...' Mike's eyes began to glow the minute he started to explain the different parts of the radio, how it worked together, and how to fix it. His long, delicate fingers twisted wires and turned screws and El watched him, entranced, her heart beating as fast as an AK-47. `And there,' he said finally. `Try it.'

El turned on the radio and for the first time in four years, the football game blared out. Both of them smiled in triumph.

`What time is it?' El asked suddenly, realising she had no idea how much time had gone by. She looked at the clock on the wall. `Wow, it's almost one.'

`I've gotta go, I promised mom I'd be home for lunch-' his stomach gave a massive growl.

El shook her head. `Have lunch here. It's a half-hour walk back to your part of Chicago.'

Mike looked like he was about to object, but then nodded. `Okay, what do you have?'

That was a good question. El got up and went over to the fridge. Inside was the food Hopper had left for her lunch. Salad bits, eggs, butter. No, that wouldn't be enough for the two of them. `We'll have to be a bit creative,' El warned Mike, shutting the fridge.

`Sounds fun.'

`Okay, find as many ingredients as you can in the house and bring them into the kitchen.'

The two of them split up, searching through cupboards. Mike found half a packet of dried rice, a packet of biscuits, a white, fluffy tomato, and a Lucky Charms box with some cereal dust and a few marshmallows at the bottom. El managed to uproot an onion from the depths of the corner cupboard, along with a tin of tuna. All these ingredients were placed on the table, along with the eggs and salad and butter from the fridge. They stared at them for a very, very long time.

`Do you know how to make anything out of this?' El asked finally.

`Maybe. Have you ever had tuna rice?'

`No.'

`We'll need the onion, the tuna and the rice. I think that I saw some pepper in the salad bag.' Mike pointed at each of the ingredients in

turn, then got some oil, a frying pan, and a knife. 'You chop the onion and I'll pick out the pepper.'

Once a small pile of onion and pepper was gathered on the chopping board, El tipped oil into the frying pan and set the stove alight. Then she put a pan of water on to boil.

'Okay, this is where I go a bit fuzzy,' Mike said sheepishly.

'I'm sure we can figure it out. Can't be *that* hard.'

They were wrong.

After two burnt fingers, one exploded mouldy tomato, and half an hour, Mike was scraping a burnt, gritty mess of rice, tuna, onions and pepper into his and El's bowls. El laid out the cutlery and got some water.

They sat down at the table and, with some trepidation, El raised a forkful to her mouth and swallowed. Her eyes bulged.

She smiled.

'Mike, you've *got* to try this!'

Pleasant surprise washed through Mike's chest and he eagerly swallowed down some of his meal.

It was disgusting.

El started laughing, then laughed even harder when Mike chucked his jumper at her.

'You are *evil*!'

El caught the jumper and couldn't stop giggling. 'Sorry,' she spluttered, trying (and failing) to keep a straight face. Mike saw her, going scarlet with suppressed laughter, eyes sparkling, and suddenly his mouth was opening before he could stop it.

'There's this terrible sixties diner Dustin introduced me to on Thursday,' he said quickly, 'and I wondered if- you know, only if you

wanted to- maybe you and Max could come sometime. Tomorrow morning.'

`Yeah, okay. I'd like that. What time should we meet you there?' El knotted her fingers together under the table. Did this count as a date? *Was Mike asking her out on a date?*

`Their breakfast is pretty good. Is seven okay? They stop serving waffles at eight.' Mike looked about as nervous as she felt. `I mean, if that's too early, you don't have to.'

`No,' El said quickly, straightening up. `I'll phone Max and tell her. And thanks again for fixing the radio.'

`No problem.' He walked out into the hallway, El next to him. `See you tomorrow.' And then Mike walked down the musty corridor, towards the stairs. Just when he reached them, he gave her a quick, shy wave, and then bounded down the stairs, the overhead lights flickering constantly.

El shut the door.

5. Chapter Five: Fairy Lights, Fistfights

5

One month left of school.

Sunday rolled blearily around, bringing with it a sweep of stiflingly hot weather. Dogs panted in the shade, air conditioners were set at full blast, and every window was thrown wide open, looking for all the world like little eyes embedded in the Chicago skyscrapers.

`You aren't *seriously* going to wear your punk stuff, are you?' Max groaned, flopped back on El's bed, sweltering.

`I'd melt if I did...' another item of clothing came flying towards Max. She rolled away to dodge it and then sat up. El chucked her black sweater out and Max caught it.

`It's only breakfast at a diner. Why do you care so much about what you wear?' The only clothing that El could have possibly worn without melting was a pink T-Shirt left over from Christmas, when an elderly relative refused point-blank to believe El didn't like pink.

`Because if I wear *that*,' El said grimly, pointing at the abomination, `I'll never live it down.'

`I've got an idea.' Max got up and headed into Hopper's room, El in tow. She opened Hopper's wardrobe and found a flannel shirt, then tossed it to El. `Put that on and wear your black vest. Then stick on your jeans.'

For a moment, El considered the bundle scrunched up in her hands, then shrugged. What harm could it do? After shooing Max out of the room El got dressed, then stood in front of Hopper's shaving mirror. Yeah. It looked punk enough for her to like it, and the shirt stopped the risk of third degree sunburn.

`Okay, let's go.'

0

Max spotted their bikes first. She hopped off of her skateboard, tucked it under her arm, and ran into the diner.

`Wow.'

El opened the glass door and almost collided with Max as she took in the scene around her.

`Wow,' she agreed, looking about with wide eyes. `This literally *is* the sixties.' Then she noticed Lucas Sinclair waving at her and Max, Dustin Henderson and Will Byers next to him. El knew him from her English class. Still a little jet-lagged, she and Max walked towards them and sat down at the table. Max sat next to Lucas, despite there being a free chair next to El.

`Where's Wheeler?' Max asked, eyes flicking between the three boys already there.

`Don't know. Must've overslept,' Lucas answered.

There was an awkward silence, filled with the sounds of the Beatles. Eventually, Dustin turned to Will.

`Have you been practising Dig Dug?' He asked.

`You play Dig Dug?' Max blurted out.

`Yeah. I know it's not "cool", but-'

`What are you talking about? Dig Dug's amazing.'

Dustin couldn't have looked more surprised at Max Mayfield liking nerdy video games than if she'd told him she ground up puppies for fun.

That stunned quiet only lasted a short time- the two of them launched into a frenzied conversation about `controls' and `combos' and several other things El couldn't figure out for the life of her.

Unfortunately, that left Will, Lucas and El in an awkward quiet.

`So...' Lucas started, tapping his fingers next to the menu. `What did

you guys think of Full Metal Jacket? It came out in cinemas a couple of days ago.'

El latched onto the topic gratefully. 'I really liked it. You?' Will shrugged.

'I thought it was okay. But I didn't like the gore that much.'

'Not into that then?'

'Nope.' Will seemed to consider something for a moment. 'Once, Mike thought it would be a good idea to watch The Thing and I threw up.'

There was a loud, snorting eruption from Lucas. 'You puked, and then *fainted* into the puke,' he said, still snorting at the memory. 'And then Mrs Wheeler had to hose you down in the garden.'

'That's a pleasant image,' El smiled, now completely at ease.

'What's a pleasant image?' A voice called.

Mike sat down at the table to a chorus of 'Hi Mike's. He took off his sweater and left it over the back of his chair.

'Sorry I'm late. My alarm didn't go off.'

Denise showed up to take their orders. Her make up was running and the elaborate beehive hairstyle was on the verge of collapse. They all ordered waffles apart from Max, who stubbornly insisted on pancakes.

0

At the birth of the universe, there was the Big Bang.

For some reason, that was what El thought of when she looked around the table. Dustin and Max had discovered their shared love (and unknowing rivalry) of Dig Dug and *bang*, talking like they weren't ever going to stop. Her, Lucas and Will started talking about films and *bang*, they were discussing the special effects used to create the Chest Chomp in The Thing.

Four boys who she and Max had never spoken to in their *lives* were arguing with them over the merits and drawbacks of Han and Luke.

`Han's a total badass,' Dustin argued passionately. `Luke's a farm boy.'

`He can control the force! Are you *insane*?' El half squeaked from indignation.

`Bet it's only 'cause you think he's *handsome*,' Mike batted his eyes at her. El swatted him with a napkin.

An annoying, knowing glint sparked up in Max's eyes, and it was a look El didn't particularly like.

Shit, she was about to do something.

`So, Mike,' Max began, innocently enough.

Shit shit shit.

`Got a girlfriend?'

NO!

`Er-' Mike looked completely blindsided. `No. Why do you ask?'

`No reason,' she replied as her eyes slid round to El, who stomped on her foot.

They carried on their conversations.

So El didn't notice Mike's eyes flicking up at her every few seconds, like he was trying to memorise her before she went home.

0

`I *hate* you.'

`No you don't,' was the easy reply. `Because of me, Mike practically couldn't stop looking at you.'

In El's humble opinion, Max was looking way too pleased with herself seeing how she'd embarrassed El in the diner. Karla DeVito blared from the record player, guaranteeing noise complaints. In the grotty

apartment block the walls were as thin as paper.

`What do you mean, he couldn't stop looking at me?' A small part of El stood on it's hind legs, nose twitching. She told it, firmly, to shut up.

`I *mean*, you're obviously in love with Wheeler and he's obviously in love with you.' The record started skipping, so Max fiddled about with it as she spoke. `Seriously, you need to do something about this or we'll all die of suspense.'

`You're more likely to die because your best friend got sick of you embarrassing her in public,' El snapped back. `And change the record, We Are Not Alone always gets stuck there.'

Cut down- cut down- cut down- cut down- The jarring racket stopped when El took out the vinyl disk and replaced it with one of Hopper's old records; You Don't Mess Around With Jim.

The first time he'd played that record for El was when she was about eight. Stacey Smith had invited every girl in the class to her birthday party except for El, and she'd returned home a blubbering mess. Hopper had eventually teased out of her what the problem was.

`You know what this needs?' He asked, clapping his hands to his knees. `Shitty old time rock music.' And he'd put the record in, set the needle whirring over it, and danced with El for hours until the two of them were completely out of breath.

Then he'd read her Anne of Green Gables until she fell asleep.

El smiled at the memory as she danced with Max, jumping around like a total idiot.

`You don't mess around with Jim,' they sang at each other, as a key turned in the front door lock.

Hopper came in, carrying bags of food, home from the supermarket.

`I'm back!' He hollered over the music. Relief spread through El and she quickly ran forwards to take one of the bags. Max took the needle off the record, and got the other bag. `How was the diner?' Hopper

asked, easing out of his boots and tossing them next to El's small, worn canvas sneakers.

`Brilliant. The pancakes were amazing,' Max answered, putting food into the fridge. `Henderson practically had a meltdown when I ordered them instead of the waffles. It was hilarious.'

`So you two had fun. Good.' Hopper was so used to having Max around it was like he'd adopted another child somewhere along the line without noticing. `Anything else I should know?'

Immediately El shot daggers from her eyes at Max, giving her a vicious warning with no words. Max seemed to understand that telling Hopper about Mike was beyond the pale, and gave her a little nod.

`No. Nothing else,' she replied blithely, before moving the ketchup bottles aside to put in a carton of orange juice. `Any more gang stuff?'

`Not yet.' Hopper carefully put his gun into the drawer and locked it. `Can't be long before something else happens.' His eyes focused on Max, scanning her for bruises. There were five on her pale wrist in the shape of someone's fingers. Max caught Hopper's gaze and went stiff. Covertly, she shook her sleeve over her wrist. `Anyway, do you girls want lunch or are you still full from your breakfast?'

`No. We ate really early. The diner stops selling breakfast at eight.' El hopped up onto one of the stools, watching her dad make them omelette. Cracking the eggs, grinding the pepper, dropping in little knobs of butter. Then Hopper picked up a fork and whisked the whole thing into a yellow-white mixture, and tipped half of it into the frying pan. The egg mix turned pale as it cooked.

`Aren't you having anything?' El asked, eyes roving over Hopper's tired, unshaven face.

`Nah. I'm not really hungry.' The eggs snapped and hissed. He expertly flipped it over with a spatula, then slid the omelette onto a plate. Hopper passed the plate over to Max as he started on El's lunch.

`Well, he isn't exactly wasting away,' Max chipped in cheekily.

`Watch it.' Hopper pointed the spatula at her in mock-aggression. `I managed to take down five drunk assholes with guns last week, I'll take you on next.' He handed over El's plate, and then put on the record again. Once more, Jim Croce's song blared out into the apartment.

As Hopper went to his room, he did stupid little twist dance moves. El covered her eyes.

`Dad, stop it!'

`What?' He teased, now clicking his fingers in time to the music. `Am I embarrassing you?'

`We're eating!'

Hopper raised up his hands in surrender. `Fine. I'll stop.' Still with a massive grin on his face, Hopper walked into his bedroom, leaving the two girls to eat their omelettes in peace.

`I love your dad,' Max told El, before spearing a chunk of omelette.

`Yeah,' El smiled, looking at the closed door. `I love him too.'

0

School felt different.

Mike couldn't put his finger on it, but it was as if something was pulsing under the surface. A tight skin was stretched across whatever it was, and that skin was getting thinner, more worn, every single day.

Troy was strutting about like he owned the place.

Dallas sauntered through the corridors, showing off his penknife skills to girls behind the bike shed.

Small-scale fistfights broke out regularly between the Chicago Dogs and the Texans. Black eyes and bloodied knuckles were common

sights.

Principal Sanders was looking more panicked than ever.

Sometimes, it wasn't even safe enough to be in the recess yard at break. Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Will had had to resort to sheltering inside an empty store cupboard to stay unhassled.

More often than not, they were joined by Max and El.

`Okay, if we show you this place, you *have* to keep it a secret,' Lucas reiterated as he walked next to a lethargically nodding Max. `*Absolutely* secret.'

`I think she probably heard you the first time,' Will said. `And anyway, it's not like El and Max are going to tell everyone. Are you?'

El shook her head adamantly. `No. We'll keep the cupboard secret. Promise.'

Their footsteps squeaked on the linoleum floors, polished with cheap bleach. Every few seconds, Mike would check over his shoulder to make sure they weren't being followed.

`Okay, we're here,' Lucas announced in clear relief. He quickly took a key out of his pocket, slotted it into the lock, and opened the door. `Ta-da.'

The cupboard had been converted. Posters were stuck up on the walls, christmas lights draped along the doorframe, there was even a small stash of candy in the corner.

El took it all in, eyes wide with wonder and astonishment.

`How did you do this?' She breathed, touching the posters, running her finger along the walls.

Mike smiled, pride glowing on his face. His nose wrinkled slightly as he smiled, and El felt a weird tug around the region of her chest.

`I found the key on the floor outside and opened the cupboard. There weren't any supplies inside so we figured no one was using it. Will

got the fairy lights, and we all donated the posters and candy. I mean, it's quite small, but-

`It's amazing,' El stopped him. She smiled, and repeated it. `It's amazing.'

There was a horrified gasp. Everyone in the cupboard whipped round to Will, who was looking out into the corridor.

`Troy! Coming this way!' He hissed.

`What?'

`I don't think he's seen us- keep your voice down-' Will quickly shut the door and grabbed the key off Lucas. He locked them in, then flicked on the christmas lights so they could see.

Mike looked down at his hands; they were bathed in red-green-blue-yellow light. He looked like some sort of mythical creature. Some sort of alien.

He pressed his ear to the door.

Heavy boots tramped along the corridor, then stopped right in front of the cupboard.

The door rattled as someone slammed against it. They all jerked backwards; Max had a pair of scissors in her pocket. She took them apart and held one half like a knife.

She caught the others staring at her. `*Just in case,*' she mouthed.

Metallic *snicks* came from the corridor. It sounded as if Troy was flicking his penknife up and down.

`Where's the sonofabitch,' he muttered. Mike's heart rate pulsed unpleasantly in his stomach.

`You rang?' A lazy drawl trailed down the corridor. Dallas. `So. Whaddaya want, Harmer?'

`James Turner. Your Texans knifed him.'

`So that's who it was? I just saw a filthy Chicago Dog and whipped out my knife. Wanna see?' There was a small click. `Flick knife. Pop bought it for my thirteenth birthday. I've had practise.'

He stabbed it into the door with a loud *bang*. They all jolted back again.

Max pushed the second half of the scissors into Lucas' hand and curled his fingers over it, eyes still trained on the door.

`So you can stab a slab of wood,' Troy yawned. `Big deal. I've cut up more bitches than I can count.'

`Like who?'

`Cathay O'Hara. Joshua Kinney.'

`You didn't cut up O'Hara. That Hopper girl took care of that.'

`That Hopper girl is the next bitch I'm cutting up.'

El felt like her stomach had dropped through her legs. Sick rose at the back of her throat. He couldn't *actually* hurt her- could he? But then names started swirling around her head. Joshua, Cathay, God knew who else.

Troy was more than capable of killing them. He was more than capable of killing her.

Oh, Jesus.

Suddenly a warm hand was closing over hers. Mike looked at her, brown eyes fierce.

`I won't let him,' he whispered, so only she could hear him.

El couldn't react. Her entire brain seemed paralysed by the rapidly unfolding events. So, instead of doing what she wanted- squeezing Mike's hand back- she turned away to the door. There was an awkward moment, then Mike dropped her hand, and looked in the other direction.

Troy and Dallas were still talking.

`Wanna end this?' Dallas asked brusquely. `I'll give you three weeks. Then we fight. Both our gangs, knives, heaters, chains, everything. We end this.'

`Deal.'

There was the sound of the two teenagers yanking their knives out of the wood and then they walked away, heavy boots marching in opposite directions.

Silence in the cupboard. They all stayed completely quiet until Troy and Dallas were out of earshot.

`I think we're safe,' Dustin breathed, leaning against the wall. `That was so scary.'

`What are heaters?' Max asked nervously, taking back her scissors from Lucas.

`No idea.'

Mike decided to speak to El again, even though he'd clearly embarrassed himself earlier. `You okay?'

El looked at him, completely white. `Yeah. I'll be fine. I can fight him.' Her mouth set into a hard line.

Max glanced at Lucas, tapped his shoulder, and pointed. `See what I mean about tough?' She whispered.

`Yeah,' Lucas whispered back. `El's crazy.'

And then the bell rang.

Recess was over.

6. Chapter Six: Box Tulips and Beatings

6

On Saturday, Hopper knelt in front of the TV, cursing and bashing it repeatedly on its square, chunky head.

`What in God's name are you doing?' El took a bite out of her sandwich.

`Stupid TV broke again...' Hopper slammed his hand next to the aerial. Static fuzzed up the screen for a brief moment, then returned to black. `Damn. I don't think we can afford a new TV set, kid. Sorry.'

El took another chomp out of her sandwich, the peanut butter smooth on her tongue, then smiled at her dad. `I think I know who can fix it.'

Mike was staring up at his bedroom ceiling when the phone in the landing rang. It was probably for his mom, or maybe one of his dad's friends. So he ignored it, rolled over and started to read an old issue of the X-Men.

The phone died off.

And then started again.

Mike sat up, frowning, and then padded across the floor in his Star Wars socks. He was about to go out when he heard Mrs Wheeler answer it in the slightly snappish voice she reserved for unplanned phone calls.

`Yes, hello? Who is this?'

Mike retreated back to his bed, and carried on reading in his Star Wars socks. But not two minutes later his door burst open, Mrs Wheeler standing there, holding the phone in her hand.

`Mike, it's for you. And there's- a girl on the other end.'

`A girl?'

`Yes. She says you're friends at school.'

Mike frowned, then sat up. `El! Yeah, we're friends. Can you pass her over?'

In answer, Mrs Wheeler showed him the phone cord. It was already stretched as taut as it would go.

Mike got up and took the phone off his mom, who stood right next to him, blatantly listening in.

`Mom, can I have some privacy?'

Mrs Wheeler looked confounded. `Why would you need privacy?'

`Mom.' Mike made sure she was back down the stairs before speaking. `El? Is that you?'

`Mike? Oh, great. It took me forever to get your phone number. Can you come over? The TV's broken and dad's gone out to the police station.'

`Right! Yeah, sure. Do you want me to come over now?'

`If that's okay?'

`Yeah, it's fine!' Hopefully he didn't sound too eager... he toned it down a little. `See you in ten. Maybe twenty. Bye.' Mike hung up, then ran back into his bedroom and grabbed his jacket. He pulled it on then saw his reflection. He gave his hair a quick run-through with the comb, and then heaved his rucksack full of technical stuff onto his back.

`Mom, I've got to go out.' Mike stuck his head round the kitchen door, where Mrs Wheeler stood, arms crossed. `I'm not sure when I'll be back, but I can phone you when I get there.'

`Why are you spending so much time west?' Her voice was quiet. `Are you in a gang now? A Chicago Dog?'

`Mom, I'm not in one of the gangs. You know I'm not getting mixed up in that.' Hurt was rising up in Mike's chest, pushing it's way into

his ribcage.

`Then where are you going?' Mrs Wheeler started to throw rice into a pan from a small packet. A cascade of white grains jumped over the edges of the pan, down into the stove. `I want to know.'

Mike completely lost patience. `I'm going to see a girl, mom! Give me some credit. She needs help with her TV, okay? And just because she lives west doesn't mean she's Troy's girlfriend or something. El is probably the nicest girl I've ever met.'

Mrs Wheeler looked, for a moment, ashamed. `Okay. You can see your friend.'

Mike walked down the hall and out of the door. For a moment, he turned back round to see his mom. He hesitated, then went back.

`You know she's not my girlfriend, right?'

`I- I know, it's just- you're growing up so fast. With all the stuff going on at your school.' Mrs Wheeler wiped the corners of her eyes. `You shouldn't have to worry about all this. Your sister certainly didn't.'

`Nancy didn't have Troy in her year.'

There was a small splutter of laughter. Mrs Wheeler smiled at her son, then pushed in him the direction of the door. `Go on. Or you won't get back before curfew.'

The sun looked like a big, melting scoop of mango ice cream, suspended in the sky. It's harsh summer glare made Mike squint as he walked along the street. It was easy to distinguish the invisible wall between east and west Chicago. As he walked further and further towards the sun dogs began to look more underfed, more homeless appeared on street corners, faceless strangers in hoodies leered at him from darkened alleys. A girl with dyed purple hair glared at him from behind a van, a lit cigarette dangling from her lip.

Mike checked over his shoulder every few seconds, just in case Dallas or Troy were bored and looking to beat someone up.

He realised what his mom had meant when she said he was growing up too fast.

After ten minutes of speed-walking through west Chicago, Mike reached El's apartment block. It had shattered windows, stains spreading right down the walls, and litter blew across the sidewalk.

He pressed the sticky intercom button, and almost immediately this time it buzzed to let him in. Mike opened the door and walked up the stairs until he reached floor three, then got to apartment 24B. He knocked.

The door creaked on unoiled hinges as El opened it. 'Hi. You made it.'

'Yeah. Sorry I'm a bit late, Mom was-' Mike stopped himself quickly. A wry smile took over El's mouth.

'Didn't want you hanging out with a west Chicago girl.'

'Sorry.' He paused. 'I don't think that, just so you know. It shouldn't matter where you live.'

'The sad thing is, it kinda does. Anyway. The TV's just there. It's screen turned to static and then Dad couldn't get it to work after that.' El knelt by the TV as Mike nodded through her account.

'Okay. I'll give it a go.' The rucksack made a very loud, clanking noise as Mike slid it off his back. He started to pull out weirdly-shaped metal objects, and continued talking. 'So, is Hopper your real dad? You don't look very similar.'

El stiffened. 'Of course he's my dad.'

'I mean, are you adopted? Actually, sorry. That's none of my business.'

'No, it's okay. He found me in a cardboard box outside the police station when I was a few days old. No one ever traced my family but Dad's guess is my mom couldn't cope with a baby and decided to give me up. Then he couldn't find anyone to take me in so adopted me.' El's eyebrows arched sardonically. 'The end.'

Mike snipped through a wire. A puff of smoke burst from the TV. 'That isn't the end,' he told her, replacing the wire. 'You've had fifteen years. There's got to be more of your story. Like- like how did you get that scar? On your cheek.'

Immediately El touched the thin mark on her cheek, eyes crinkling up. 'Oh, God. That's from the time Dad thought it would be a good idea to put me on a zipwire when I was two. We went to this park and I saw the zipwire and really wanted to go on it. Dad said okay, so we waited in line. Then he put me on the seat, pulled back the zipwire and let go, without realising he was supposed to run next to me. So I went flying down this wire, screaming my head off, and Dad realised he'd screwed up so started to pretend everything was okay-' by that point, El could barely get the words out- 'And yelled stuff like 'You're doing great! Don't let go!' and, of course, I panicked and let go right when the seat hit the tyres at the end of the zipline. Then I really did go flying and faceplanted in the gravel.'

Mike abandoned the TV and laughed until he stomach hurt.

It took forever to fix the TV. Mainly because Mike and El kept getting very distracted by telling each other stupid stories from when they were little. But thankfully, Mike succeeded.

He pressed the On button and a western film came on the TV.

'Thank you!' El said as the man on the screen drawled, 'Sure, Miss Sylvie. I'd be indebted to y'all.' She switched the set off again.

Mike was looking past her. El followed his gaze and saw he was looking at her toothbrush holder, filled with box tulips. The coloured heads were a collection of blues, reds, oranges, and stinging yellows.

'What are they?' Mike asked curiously, walking over and touching one of the paper petals.

'Origami. You fold paper and it becomes one of these.' El picked one of her favourites and gave it to Mike. 'See? You know what, you've been showing me so much technical stuff recently. Do you want to know how to make a box tulip?'

`Yeah. Sure.'

So El led a boy into her room who wasn't Hopper for the first time ever. Her room was still a total mess- El hastily kicked a few old pairs of knickers underneath her bed.

Her and Mike sat down at her desk, where stacks of origami card and an instruction book waited. El didn't need it. Immediately, she reached for a piece of vivid red paper and put it white-side-up.

`Okay. So, first you need to fold the paper across the diagonal- yeah, exactly. Then do it again. Now fold it from top to bottom. This next bit's a bit weird... you need to collapse it into a triangle.'

`Collapse it?'

`Yeah, try it.'

Mike did, then a triumphant smile lit up his face. The instructions continued, El occasionally reaching over and completing a step herself. At some point, they had moved onto the same chair, sharing El's desk seat. Mike's shoulder, ribcage and right knee pressed against El's. She could feel how quick his heart was beating and knew that he could feel her heart too.

None of that mattered to El.

She was just enjoying the feeling of being so close to him as she gently closed her hands over his, tucking the left flap of the tulip into the right flap. Everything felt hyper-sensitive, like there were too many nerves all over her hands and arms and feet.

Then it was finished.

El moved back from the chair and Mike stood up. A pretty, scarlet, slightly wonky tulip lay on her desk, next to a collection of spilled felt tips.

The last of the sunlight faded away from El's window and her room sank into darkness. She flicked on her light, then smiled.

`Well done,' she said, picking up the flower and tucking it into Mike's

palm. 'It's really good for a first attempt.'

'I had a good teacher.' Mike went back out into the living room and started packing away his tools. 'Where could I get origami card like that?'

'Take some from here! Seriously, I don't mind.' El went back into her room and returned with a stack of colourful paper.

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah, it's fine.'

Mike slid his hands underneath the card and pulled them close to his chest, rucksack hanging heavy on his back. 'Thanks.'

'No problem.'

As a few dogs yipped and barked in the distance, El walked Mike out into the street. Her explanation was that a druggie sometimes hung around on the stairs- apparently his name was Earl.

When she left the building, she did something weird- El looked in both directions, like a fox tasting the air, before leaving properly.

Mike gave her a funny look. El caught it, and shook her head slightly, telling him to leave it.

The two kids stood in the rapidly cooling air. Mike still held his paper and his tulip. The street lights sent out glowing orange halos of light.

He imagined what it would be like to kiss El underneath a street light.

Almost without thinking, he stepped forward-

'Mike-'

And guilt immediately propelled him back. 'Sorry, I-'

'Mike!' El's voice came out a shrill scream. Whipping round, Mike saw what she was looking at, and dropped the origami card in a

tsunami of garishly coloured paper.

A huddled mass lay in the orange glare of a streetlight. Something sticky, and black, was pooling beneath it.

The two of them ran forwards. El dropped to her knees next to the feebly stirring thing and immediately the knees of her jeans were saturated with blood.

It was Georgie Steiner.

'He's a Texan,' El whispered. 'Troy'll kill us if he sees us helping a Texan.'

'El, we can't let him die!'

Georgie let out a thin, weak moan. His face seemed naked without his glasses. Blood ebbed freely from a cut in his head, his lips were puffed and swollen, and Mike was horrified to see that Troy had carved the word 'Texan' into Georgie's flabby stomach. Red flesh glistened under the street light.

'The hospital isn't far from here,' El told him, snapping into action mode. 'Do you know what to do?'

'Yeah, I saw it on TV once... we need to keep his neck still, and keep talking to him.' Mike held Georgie's neck steady and lifted him into his feet. A low groan came from deep in Georgie's chest as El gently put his arm over her shoulder. Mike did the same, and the three of them staggered along the street, like they were in a grotesque three-legged race. All the while, Georgie mumbled unintelligibly about his glasses.

Georgie was considerably taller than El, and his head had begun to rest on her curly hair. His cheek pressed into her scalp.

'Keep... talking...' he gurgled, almost unintelligible.

'Okay! Uh... Once, Dad told Flo to take care of me for a day and-'

Georgie heaved and a shock of horror jumped up El's chest. Something warm trickled down the back of her neck. Hysteria

quickly rising in her, El kept gabbling. 'Almost ran Dad over with her scooter-'

Mike struggled to keep Georgie upright. Terror ran him through repeatedly, icy and sharp. If they didn't get to the hospital in time-

If they didn't-

Mike began to shake.

'The hospital! I can see the hospital!' He half yelled, the sterile white building shining in his eyes. Him and El increased their speed as Georgie became more and more of a dead weight. Mike banged on the glass door, leaving a bloody handprint behind.

A nurse hurried to the door and let them in. She immediately started to shout for a doctor as three other nurses ran to relieve them of Georgie. His weight was taken off Mike and El and they collapsed into the cheap plastic chairs filling the waiting room.

El breathed deeply, her eyes shut. She really was going to be sick if she wasn't careful.

'You okay?' Mike asked quietly. El decided it would be safer to keep her mouth shut but nodded infinitesimally. Adrenaline pulsed through Mike's veins. His hands were still shaking. He curled his hands into fists, trying to keep them steady.

'Hello?' A nurse called. Both Mike and El looked up. 'My name's Adelaide. Were you the ones who brought in George Steiner?'

'Yeah. That was us.' El's voice sounded croaky but at least she was speaking.

'Good. I just need to ask you two a few questions.'

After fifteen minutes, Adelaide the Nurse knew their names, addresses, and an account of what happened. She smiled comfortingly at them. 'I'll phone your parents now.' And she retreated behind the desk and started dialling.

Ten minutes later, Hopper's police car pulled up with a screech of

brakes.

`El, what did I tell you about our Don't Be Stupid rules?' He demanded the moment he stormed into the waiting room. Mike awkwardly looked away as Hopper continued. `What if Troy had still been there?'

`Well, maybe I wouldn't have the Don't Be Stupid rules if you were ever home!' El yelled back, before striding forwards and hugging Hopper tightly. He hugged her back.

`Are you oka-'

`Yes, I'm okay.'

They stayed that way for a moment. Mike felt a sudden stab of envy for a dad like that when Karen's car appeared outside the hospital. Her stunted, sensible heels clacked on the linoleum as she walked up to Mike, her face drawn and unreadable.

Mike stood up nervously, hoping to God she wasn't going to ban him from seeing El.

Karen reached him and immediately pulled him into a comforting, enveloping hug. Then without a word, she led him out of the hospital and back into the car. Mike twisted around, and mouthed a goodbye at El.

She raised her own hand in farewell.

Hopper parked in the garage round the back of the apartment block. Georgie's blood was still rubbed into the grey concrete. El looked away and a gleam caught her eye.

A pair of round glasses, like the ones John Lennon wore, lay on the sidewalk. One of the arms was bent out of shape; blood was smeared over the cracked lenses.

Hopper watched silently as El picked up the glasses, wiped off the blood with her sleeve, and put them carefully into her pocket. Then without saying a word she led the way to the apartment block,

opened the front door, and walked up the stairs. Everything seemed cold and suspended.

The second her and Hopper entered the apartment El went straight to her room and sat onto her creaky bed. Only an hour ago she was having the time of her life with Mike.

Now...

El twisted her fingers into her hair and buried her face on her knees, eyes tight shut. After a few moments, the surge of emotion left her. El then pulled her hands out of her hair.

Her palms were rusty with Georgie Steiner's blood.

El bolted into the shower, stripped, turned the shower on as hot as she could stand and crouched underneath the warm spray. Blood washed from her hair and the back of her neck, swirls of red slipping down the drain.

Her skin turned steadily pinker the longer she huddled underneath the burning shower.

That was where El stayed, unmoving, for the next hour, before she eventually emerged and changed into her pyjamas.

She had homework to do.

Finally figured out how to do the horizontal line- phew. Only took about five months. If anyone's wondering, the zipline story El told Mike actually happened. That was not a pleasant day for two year old me. Happy Easter/passover!

7. Chapter Seven: Skateboards and Fireworks

7

Two weeks passed by.

Max and El were hanging around in front of the skate park in Chicago, kicking the ground with their heels.

Every few seconds, El looked around. She wasn't just looking for the boys. El tried to calm herself down by reminding herself that Troy wasn't likely to do anything in broad daylight.

It didn't really help.

`Hey,' Max said softly. `Stop looking around. Troy won't do anything here.' Underneath Max's arm was a skateboard with `madrid' painted across the bottom of it. El, on the other hand, had a pair of rollerblades dangling by their laces from her hand.

As another bulky teenage boy did a nose-blunt on a ramp, El turned to Max.

`You did remember to tell them, didn't you? You're the one who has their numbers.'

`Lucas told me their numbers and I dialled them in *exactly*.'

El scanned the surging swarm of people, trying to find any of their friends in the crowd. Unfortunately there was some sort of charity concert going on across the street, meaning that all of America and most of Canada had flocked to Chicago Hall.

`It'll take them ages to get through that crowd,' huffed Max, dropping her skateboard and doing mini-circles around El.

`Mayfield!' Dustin yelled, waving at them from the other side of the park.

`How the hell did they get over there?' Yelled Max, almost falling off her skateboard.

`Doesn't matter. Come on!' El dodged through the other skaters and reached the panting, scarlet boys. Mike was looking very different without his sweater. `How did you get here?' She asked curiously. `We couldn't see you anywhere.'

Mike was still out of breath. `Dustin's idea,' he panted. `Said to cut through backyards.'

`It worked, didn't it?' Dustin replied defensively. `And we're here now. So where do we rent the skates?'

`Just over there,' Max pointed. `Fifty cents for rollerblades, dollar for a skateboard.' Immediately, the boys started to count their money and then headed over. They returned with their arms full.

Will awkwardly put his skateboard on the ground, planted his foot on it's body, and experimentally wheeled it back and forth.

He almost fell over there and then, but luckily regained balance, arms flailing like a windmill.

`Okay, okay. Calm down,' Max ordered. `Your feet are wrong. Sinclair, you come over too. And Henderson.' She began to instruct them on where to put their feet, how to keep their balance, to keep their back straight.

Mike held up his rollerblades embarrassedly. `Not sure how to skate with these. They seemed easier than a skateboard.' There was a loud crash as Dustin went flying off his skateboard, his cap landing five feet away. El stifled a giggle, before getting down to business.

`Okay, lace them up.' El sat down on the ground, wriggled her feet into her skates, and quickly tied the laces with quick, experienced fingers. Mike watched how she did it and tried to replicate how, doing a double knot and banging the heel of the skate against the hard, hot tarmac.

`Now what?'

El got onto her feet. `First step, stay upright.' She stretched out her hand and Mike took it, trying to find his balance. He wobbled a few times but managed to stay on his feet. El held both of his hands in

her own, keeping him steady.

`Well done. Now put your feet in a T shape. Yeah, exactly. Push forward.' Mike did, and El skated backwards, still holding onto his hands. They looked like they were doing some sort of bizarre dance.

Mike smiled. `I'm actually doing it!' And then his skates went out from under him and he fell over onto the tarmac. El went right down with him with a yelp and the breath was knocked straight out of her chest.

She turned her head to look at Mike. For a few nerve-racking seconds, he didn't move. Then-

`Ow,' Mike groaned, straightening up, one hand rubbing the back of his head. El breathed out with relief.

`Mike! You okay?' Will yelled over.

`Yeah, I'm fine.' Mike started trying to get up. `Can we go again?'

El was surprised at his nerve, especially seeing as the knees of his jeans had been completely torn away. `Sure. Do you need me to hold your hands again?'

`Can you hold my hand anyway?' Mike didn't seem to realise what he'd said until a good five seconds after the words had left his lips, at which point he began to resemble a cut of corned beef.

The others went deadly quiet.

Apart from Max, who looked like her favourite TV show had come on.

There was a long, stretched out silence. No one could have guessed El's insides were dancing the conga.

El took both Mike's hands, looked him dead in the eye. He met her gaze. And she started guiding him around the small stretch of tarmac that wasn't being used for terrifying skateboard stunts.

El could have sworn her heart was almost too big for her chest to

contain it.

Meanwhile, Max was showing Lucas, Dustin and Will how to do a wheelie.

Dustin put up his hand. 'Max, shouldn't we stick with staying on the skateboard for a bit?'

'No. No one got anywhere without diving in headfirst,' Max replied determinedly. 'Now tilt your weight back. But not too much.' There was a loud crash. 'That was too much.'

'Yeah, figured that,' Lucas answered, picking himself up off the ground. 'Next time we come here, I'm taping a pillow to my butt.'

The sun continued to rise, and then began to fall. After a while, the six kids noticed that it was four in the afternoon, and that they were wringing with sweat. Innumerable scratches and grazes covered the boys. But after several hours of hard practice, Mike knew how to skate backwards and execute a perfect spin. Will had actually gone down a ramp without breaking anything, Dustin managed to do a wheelie and Max had helped Lucas to grind a staircase. The result of that had been mixed, to say the least.

Dustin, Will, Mike and Lucas carried their rollerblades/skateboards back into the hut.

'That was amazing,' Will said happily. 'Thanks,' he added as he handed the skateboard back to the sour-faced employee at the desk.

'I know,' Lucas beamed, his face a weird blend of shell-shock, admiration and bloody grazes. 'Did you see me grind that staircase?'

'Lucas, the concrete probably still has an impression of your face in it.' Mike finished unlacing the rollerblades and lay them on the desk. He stood on the bone-dry grass in his socks.

'Small detail!' Lucas protested indignantly. 'My landing was a little off, but I could tell Max was impressed.'

'She didn't stop laughing for ten minutes.'

`You know, that's a sign she likes you.' El's shrewd voice cut over them. Soundlessly, she'd walked over to listen in on their conversation. `I've known her since I was eleven. Trust me. I brought your shoes, by the way.' El held out Mike's shoes, then glanced down at his feet. `Nice socks.'

Han Solo held a gun on the left sock, and Luke Skywalker wielded a lightsaber on the right one. Mike laughed and quickly covered them up with his sneakers.

They all walked back in a group. El and Will were chatting about To Kill A Mockingbird, lagging far behind the others.

`See, I can't believe some schools ban it,' Will was saying passionately, gesturing with his hands. `The *point* of it is to make people think about their actions.'

`I know! It's unacceptable to ban it because it makes some teacher feel guilty. The *point* is to make people uncomfortable.'

They got so distracted Will completely missed Mike repeatedly yelling his name.

`Will! We're at my house.'

`Huh?' Will jolted out of his conversation with El and looked at the door, where Dustin and Lucas already waited. `Oh, right. Coming. Bye, El. See you in English tomorrow.'

`See you.' El gave a dorky little wave she immediately regretted. Her and Max carried on walking. West Chicago was still half an hour away. And then El suddenly burst out with what she'd been suppressing. Mike said he wanted to hold my hand! *He actually said that!*

`Woah, calm down. Weren't you happy with being "just friends"?' Max's fingers framed quotation marks.

`Of course I wasn't, I said that to shut you all up.' El did half-skips along the pavement, smiling uncontrollably. `Am I meant to feel like this? This is like the time I drank too much Cherry Coke.'

A cyclist barrelled down the sidewalk towards them, then quickly turned off into the road, narrowly missing them. Max and El paid him no heed.

`El, you're an idiot,' Max said bluntly, planting her hands on El's shoulders to keep her still. `Go round to Wheeler's and ask him out.'

Slowly, the Cherry-Coke-Feeling dripped out of El. Her shoulders slumped, and the smile faded. `I can't,' she said. `Even if I wanted to.'

Her mind rewound seven days.

Hopper read his newspaper at the breakfast table. Behind him, El was trying to get the toaster to work.

`Dad, I think the toaster blew the fuse again.' Once more, she made a futile attempt to toast her Eggos.

The TV died.

El looked guiltily at Hopper. `I can fix it,' she said awkwardly. Hopper shook his head, and put down his newspaper.

`Sit down. We need to talk.'

Immediately, every bad thing El had done since birth raced through her head. `What's this about?' Her voice went up a good three octaves from nerves.

`Have you seen the newspaper recently?' When El shook her head no, Hopper slid his copy over to her. El flicked up the front page and read the headline.

Stabbing in west Chicago.

El lifted her eyes from the headline to meet her dad's, but he motioned to her to keep reading.

Yesterday, five teenage girls were stabbed in a knife attack. Three boys armed with knives recognised them as the girlfriends of members of the opposing gang. Jennifer Hayes, sixteen, Orla Brown, fifteen, Amanda

Barr, sixteen, and Jessie Edwards, sixteen sadly lost their lives. Sophia Pola was resuscitated at the scene and is in critical, unstable condition.

`The Texans did this?' Horror wadded up El's throat. `They killed four girls?'

`Yeah.' Hopper pulled back the newspaper. `You know how bad things are here. It isn't safe for anyone.'

As if to back him up, a gunshot cracked out from far away, it's echo spanning its way across the civil battlefield that was west Chicago. `So that's why we're moving away after the school year ends.'

A wordless cry of fury broke out of El's mouth but Hopper quickly talked over her. `It isn't safe here. I'm not risking you being killed or ending up in a wheelchair, like that Landey kid. I found a house in the next state. I've already got the payment. We're moving.'

That was when El found her tongue. `But what about school? We start SATs next year. And what about Max? And what about Mike, and Dustin and Lucas and Will?' She slammed her hands down on the table. *`Don't you care at all?'*

`The reason we're moving is because I care!' Hopper shouted back. `I care about you. You're asking me about your friends. What about them? What about drive-by shootings? Huh? What about drunk boys going around doing whatever they want to girls in the street?'

One of their neighbours slammed on the wall and yelled for them to shut up. El and Hopper did, both of them scarlet and standing up. El was furious to register the tears blurring her vision. Fruitlessly, she tried to blink them away, but instead they started to spill down her cheeks.

`I don't want to leave Chicago,' she half-whispered, water dripping quietly off her chin. Angrily, she wiped it away.

Hopper looked at her sadly, then went down to the basement. He needed to fix the blown fuse.

`You're moving? In a week?'

El nodded miserably. 'After school finishes. Like I said. So I can't ask Mike out. Not a week before me and Dad move.'

Max rubbed the back of her neck and didn't say anything for a minute. For one horrible moment, El was certain Max was going to cry...

But Max Mayfield didn't ever cry.

Right?

'Max?' She asked nervously. Head still bent, Max mumbled something. El caught her friend's hand, and gave it a little shake. 'Max, say something!'

'Well,' Max finally said in a faux-cheerful voice, 'if you're moving in a week, we'd better make the most of it. Want an ice cream? I'm buying.'

It was almost six o'clock by the time Max reached home. It was several blocks away from El's, in a small collection of run-down bungalows on the edge of Chicago.

'Oh, jeez,' Max muttered when she saw the silhouette in the window. A little orange stub kept lighting up behind the glass. The silhouette turned, and slowly and deliberately, stubbed out the cigarette on the windowsill. Malice floated off the figure in clouds. Max made a brave stab at a smile. 'Guess I'd better go in.'

El noticed the fine sheen of sweat on Max's forehead and her shaking hands. 'Do you want me to come in with you?'

'Nah. I'll be fine. I can handle him.'

'What if he's been drinking?' In the front yard, the small porch swing creaked in the summer breeze. Clouds roiled in the sky above the house, with it's peeling paint and slanted picket fence. Max looked like she was about to turn tail and run. Then her shoulders squared and her back stiffened.

'I said I'll be fine. See you tomorrow.' And Max strode up the concrete

pathway to the ragged, creaking front door. The silhouette left the window and Neil Hargrove opened the door.

His gait wobbled as he grabbed Max's wrist and jerked her inside.

A strong impulse to throw a brick at his head overcame El but she knew if she did that Neil would only take it out on Max.

El walked back to her apartment block. She could see it from Max's house; it rose above the squat little bungalows on Max's street, one of God knew how many apartment blocks. Satellites perched on their roofs like little mushrooms.

El quite liked the roof of her apartment block.

Whenever she climbed up there, she could shunt away any thoughts she didn't want in her head. Like images of what could be happening to her best friend behind that closed door.

The clouds got steadily pinker as the evening waned away. El kept her hands shoved in the pockets of her jeans and kicked a stone ahead of her. She was wrapped up in her own little world, imagining how glorious a kiss from Mike would be. She smiled to herself...

`Hey, *bitch!*'

El froze. There was a squeal and the scent of burning tires. A pick up truck skidded to a halt next to her, black lines marking the road.

Troy hung out of the truck, holding a beer can. It clearly wasn't his first. `I said hey, *bitch*. Didn't your daddy teach you manners?'

`W- what do you want?' Shivers knocked El's knees together. She forced herself to stop shaking.

`That's a very broad question,' Troy answered. He tilted his head, opened his mouth wide, and poured beer into it. Amber liquid overspilled his red mouth and ran down his cheeks. `What *do* I want?'

A pulse bounced at the base of El's throat.

`Aw, are you *scared?*?' Troy mocked, putting on a baby voice.

There was a shattered bottle on the floor next to El. Keeping her eyes fixed on the quietly humming vehicle, El scooped it off the pavement and held it out in front of her.

'I'm not scared of you.' Even though she was. Even though awful pictures were running through her mind. Even though everyone else on the street was quickly and quietly walking away.

Why?

Troy's face turned, twisted up into a smile. He reached into his pocket, and held up a matchbox. He slid out the white box inside, with rows of matches sleeping next to each other. Their red heads looked like little hats. It was such a bizarre thing for El to register.

Now she couldn't hide her terror. Her entire body shook, the bottle trembled wildly, her mind screamed *run* but her feet stayed rooted.

Troy dragged the hat of the match across the scarred box. There was a snapping pucker of air. A flame burst up. El trained her eyes on it, not even daring to blink.

'Remember I threw a match at you in class?' Troy asked almost pleasantly, holding out flame. Behind him, his friends had started to look scared. 'This won't miss.'

And he produced a firework.

El hurled the bottle at the pick up truck. It exploded into green shards by Troy's head, cutting across his face.

Enough to make him bleed.

Troy let out a snarl and drew back his arm.

El ran. Heaving breaths ripped from her lungs, seared her throat and got lost halfway to her mouth.

Troy screamed after her and threw the burning firework as hard as he could.

It exploded at her heels.

Adrenaline flooded her veins and capillaries and nerves, filling her entire body up. El ran faster than she thought possible as the laughter of drunk boys sped away in the opposite direction. She could smell smoke.

There was a clang, and a scream.

El hoped Troy had only hit a trash can.

She didn't stop running until she reached the apartment block, barely able to breathe and fairly sure she was going to puke. El fell against the stairwell, wheezing. The cold stairs seeped through her jeans. El managed to choke in a breath, despite the fact her lungs felt like they were collapsing.

For some stupid reason, she was dangerously close to tears. El breathed deeply until she'd calmed down, then walked up to the third floor on shaking legs.

Inside the apartment, Hopper was ironing. Two scorched shirts were screwed up on the floor.

`Hi, kid. How was the skate park?' He looked up. His expression changed. `What happened?'

`Troy,' El mumbled. `I- I think you're right. We need to leave Chicago.' She couldn't tell how badly her clothes had been burned by the firework. `You're right. We're not safe.'

So, El's moving, and the gang war is escalating. What will happen? Dun dun dun. I promise the next chapter will give the characters a break. Thanks to everyone who's reviewed or liked/followed so far. Also, I probably won't be able to publish for a few days as I'm going to a wedding. Bye!

8. Chapter Eight: A Bloody Zenith

Hello! Back from the wedding. it was actually pretty good, I got to eat cake and sing Mr Brightside. So, onwards, Chapter Eight.

8

Even though it was a school night, two students at Chicago High were having sleepovers. The first was Mike Wheeler and Will Byers in east Chicago. The second was El Hopper and Max Mayfield, in Apartment 24B out west.

`How's your mom's foot?' Mike asked Will, before taking a drink of coke.

`She's on some pretty strong painkillers for the next couple of days.'

`How did she break it?'

Will pulled a face. `You know how Jonathon was meant to visit this weekend and she got a leg of pork for a special dinner?'

`Yeah.'

`When Jonathon said he couldn't make it Mom took the pork out of the freezer and said we may as well eat it now. Then she dropped it on her foot.'

Mike winced. `That sounds bad.'

`Yeah, I've never heard her swear that much in my life. I think I'll draw her a Get Well card or something.' Will looked a little embarrassed.

`That sounds like a good idea,' Mike said comfortingly. `Want to do it now?'

`Okay.'

Ten minutes later, Mike and Will were sat cross-legged on Mike's bed. Will's tongue poked out of his mouth slightly with concentration as

he frenetically scribbled.

`Do you have any skin tones?' He asked Mike, who had a quick think.

`Er- here, use this.' Mike tossed over the orange pencil. `Just colour it really lightly.'

`Would it kill Crayola to produce proper skin colours? Mom's gonna look like a Cheeto.'

`Can I see?' Mike shuffled his way along the bed to look over Will's shoulder. On the paper was a beaming Joyce. Above her were letters saying `Get Well Soon.' Joyce looked so realistic it may as well have been a photograph. `That's *amazing*,' gasped Mike, wide eyed.

`Really?' Will went pink from the praise. `Thanks.' He seemed to go quite shuffley. `Um- you know El?'

`Yeah, what about her?'

`Do you like her? You know, *like* like her?'

Mike thought for a minute, even though he didn't really need to. He just wanted to figure out the best set of words. `Yeah,' he said quietly, and then louder. `Yeah. I like her.'

Immediately a weight lifted from his chest, leaving a blissful lightness.

For a moment, something crossed Will's face, which he quickly hid with a smile.

`Ladies and gentlemen, he finally admitted it!' Will mimed cheering as Mike grinned. `So, you going to ask her to the dance? It's on Friday, so that gives you four days.'

Anxiety immediately stabbed Mike's chest. `Wait, *now*? I should ask her out now?'

`Yes, because if you don't you'll chicken out again.'

Mike couldn't deny there was certainly truth in that.

`I don't want to do it with a box of chocolates,' he said finally. `That's been used too many times.' Mike's eyes fell on the origami paper that El had left him. Colours, so many colours glowed against the boring brown of his desk.

He picked an insipid pink as his practice flower. Mike strained to remember what the instructions were; fold diagonally both ways, fold from top to bottom, and then...

Collapse it into a triangle.

Collapse it?

Yeah, try it.

The rest of the instructions came easily to Mike, El's phantom voice guiding him. The tulip wasn't too bad. Not perfect, but not terrible. Next, Mike selected a fierce orange and quickly completed it. It was better.

As Will drew behind him, Mike sat at his desk until a whole bouquet of paper flowers lay in a papered freize. He gathered them up, the stems cutting into his palms.

`What are those things called?' Will asked curiously, glancing up from his art pad.

`Box tulips. It's origami.'

`Hurry up before your mom realises you're missing.' Will made shooing motions at the door and Mike smiled. He crept out of the room, light on the balls of his feet. There was one heart-stopping moment when the bottom stair creaked loudly, but luckily, no one heard.

Mike quickly pulled on his sneakers and ran out of the house, paper flowers rustling in his hand.

`I can't believe this is our last sleepover.' El blew on Max's nails.

`If you're gonna paint my nails again, I'm glad you're moving,' Max

grumbled in reply, looking down at her black nails. 'How long does it stay on?'

'Trust me, you'll sneeze and about half of it will come off in one go.'

Max considered this, shrugged and then let El paint the nails on her other hand. The two girls were sat on El's dark duvet cover. Because it was Tuesday, Hopper was out.

He was meant to be back by eight.

Many months of experience had taught El 'back by eight' was code for any time between midnight and six in the morning. It all depended on what hell the Chicago Dogs and the Texans wreaked.

El reached for another slice of pizza, and sank her teeth into the gooey mix of tomato sauce and cheese on top. Hopper's deal was they could have as much pizza as they wanted providing they were in bed by ten o'clock.

'What do you want to do?'

Max thought for a moment. 'Horror film?' She suggested hopefully. 'Nightmare on Elm Street is on.'

'I put an immediate veto on anything that's gonna make me want to throw up.'

'Fine, then I put a ban on romance films. They make *me* want to throw up.' A glint sparked up Max's eyes. 'I know. Let's play Truth or Dare. Rock, paper, scissors for who has to go first.'

For a moment, El considered the proposal, then smiled mischievously. 'You're on.'

They played Rock, paper, scissors and El won.

'Okay, Truth or Dare?'

'Dare.'

El's eyes swept over her room, looking for inspiration. 'I dare you to

open the window and scream "I am the walrus" as loud as you can. Bonus points if a dog starts barking.'

Max marched over to the window and threw it open, and took an enormous breath.

'*I AM THE WALRUS!*' She hollered. The echo died away and the two girls listened intently.

Somewhere nearby, a dog began frantically yipping. Max leaned back from the window, flushed with victory.

'Truth or Dare?' She asked El.

'Truth.'

'At the end of Love Story, did a bug *really* fly into your eye or were you just crying?' El sighed and rolled her eyes. 'You have to tell the truth,' Max reminded her gleefully.

'Fine. I was crying. In my defence, so was most of the cinema.'

Max smacked the duvet. 'I knew it!' She crowed. 'And I pick... Truth.'

'Okay. When are you going to tell Lucas you like him?'

All colour drained from Max's face. Then she turned pale green, and finally rounded off the chameleon look with a magnificent red. 'I don't like him,' she muttered, refusing to look at El. 'He's a total nerd. If we dated he'd be alternating between making out and telling me about a conspiracy theory that Chewbacca is Darth Vader's- *love child*, or something.'

El raised her eyebrows. 'Fine. I'll let you switch to Dare.' She let the silence hang between them for a moment before breaking it. 'I dare you to phone Lucas. I know you have his number.'

Max lobbed the final slice of pizza at El. 'Fine, okay! I've liked him for a couple of weeks. And I'll think about dancing with him on Friday. But you know, *I* have a pretty good idea of what we can do now.'

Immediate suspicion twitched in El's chest. 'What?' She asked warily.

'We could phone Mike.'

'No!' El made a lunge for the phone, but Max caught her leg and started tickling her foot. El giggled helplessly and Max took her chance, grabbing the phone off the receiver.

'What was his number again?' She teased, standing on the bed and holding the phone far out of El's reach. '3-1-2-'

The empty pizza box was next to El. Almost slipping over on a stray slice of pizza El whacked Max with it, and they both fell onto the duvet in a giggly mess, mock-fighting.

That was when a bullet flew through the open window and ripped apart the photograph of El and Hopper on her desk.

Glass and shreds of photograph exploded into the room and at the speed of lightning, El and Max dropped to the floor.

'El, will you go to the dance with me? How'd you like to- no, that won't work. You're the prettiest girl I've ever met- don't say *that*.'

Mike walked along the sidewalk, eyes fixed on the concrete, locked in his thoughts. He'd spent the last ten minutes rehearsing what he was going to say to El when he asked her. At one point, he'd come up with a fairly good speech that he only realised halfway through was the speech from When Harry Met Sally.

If El said yes, he'd be the happiest person alive.

And then he reached her street.

Mike's stomach flashed to lead and dropped straight to his shoes.

The gangs were there.

All of them, every member, all the Texans, all the Chicago Dogs. Dallas and Troy squared up to each other underneath a streetlight.

Behind them, their gang members whirled chains, gripped knives, and several even had guns.

Mike realised was a heater was.

Time slowed to treacle, but Mike's breath quickened, his mouth dried. He looked upward- and staring out of an apartment window was a young boy.

The boy's eyes were wide, like a bush baby's, all black pupil and dark iris, streaks of light across the cornea. The two locked gazes. Still in the warped, slowed time, Mike stared back at the child.

The boy covered his eyes and ducked down from the window.

And time sped up again-

And Dallas shoved Troy in the chest-
And like a balloon popping, violence suddenly exploded in the street. Gunshots cracked out, windows shattered, screams echoed off the apartment block walls.

Mike watched with horror as Harry, one of the boys in his Electrics class, whipped a Texan repeatedly with a length of chain. Bloody gashes split open his forehead and face as the Texan sank to his knees, and finally collapsed onto the street. Crimson liquid pooled beneath his face.

El.

Mike sprinted around the fighting and ran to El's apartment block, keeping his head down. The paper tulips flew out of his hands, scattering in the street amongst the violence. Mike let them go. He leapt up and pulled down the fire escape ladder, then wildly scaled it, hand over hand.

An awry bullet marked a line of blood on his ear.

Mike counted the floors and then pulled himself onto the balcony. He could see El's apartment through the window. He banged on the glass desperately with the flat of his hand.

`El!' He yelled. `It's me!'

She emerged from her bedroom, curls flying out behind her, and threw up the window. El pulled Mike inside and the two of them scrambled along the floor, keeping their heads down.

Glass sprayed over them as they crawled through the living room. El led the way to her bedroom and quickly dragged Mike under the bed. Max hid there too, the whites of her eyes as wide as golf balls.

The noise in the street surged around the tiny apartment like a tsunami wave. A throbbing chorus of metal hitting flesh, screaming, and gunshots closed in on Mike's ears. He couldn't hear anything else. To the right of him, El's hands were clamped over her ears.

Every time Mike thought it couldn't possibly get worse, or louder, or every time he thought he couldn't possibly get more scared than he already was, he was proven wrong. Terror rocketed around his body to the point Mike was certain he would vomit.

A helicopter.

El's torn blinds blew back into the room as the deafening whirring filled the street. Now Mike covered his ears and pressed his face into the carpet.

`Put down your weapons!' Someone roared through a loudhailer. *`Or we will shoot!'*

El risked a look up and saw a man in a helicopter, aiming down at the street with a rifle. Next to him was the man with the loudhailer. Someone had phoned the National Guard.

`Final warning!' The man yelled, veins standing out on his forehead and neck. He paused, then nodded to the man next to him.

El pressed her face into Mike's shoulder as the man with the rifle shot down at the boys again and again.

Heavy soldier's boots pounded along the street outside.

`We will use lethal force if you don't co-operate!'

A voice, Dallas's, screamed out `Kiss my arse!'. And then there was the horrible sound of a knife being plunged into a human.

A gunshot.

A chorus of rising, falling human howls.

Dallas was dead.

Silence. Solid, bleak, empty silence, apart from the steady thrum of the helicopter, and the sound of the three teenagers breathing. The carpet was rough underneath Mike's fingers.

The following events were terrifying calm. One tiny thing could snap the peace in two as soldiers handcuffed the boys, pushed their heads down into police cars, cleared the bodies.

El counted the ambulances as they arrived. Five. But they could be sharing them.

Her, Max and Mike stayed under the bed until complete silence settled over the street.

`I think they've gone,' Max whispered.

`I'll check,' El volunteered, starting to wriggle out from under the bed.

`No, I'll do it.' Mike squirmed out on his elbows, keeping his head down, just in case. Then he peered down into the street through the window.

Puddles of blood pooled in the street, dried footprints tracking in and out of them. Bulletholes knived through overturned trash cans, stray cats eating from the spilled refuse. Mike looked up to the window where the boy had been. There was no boy. There was no *window*-only shattered glass remained.

Everything was still, and quiet, and empty.

Mike glanced back over his shoulder, where El and Max's scared eyes watched him.

`It's safe,' he said, standing up.

`That was the scariest thing I've ever gone through,' Max said quietly.
`And that includes living with my stepdad.'

Chewing her lip like there was no tomorrow, El glanced at the carpet. There was glass everywhere. Wordlessly, she began picking it up and tossing it in the trash.

Mike and Max followed her lead, sweeping glass off the floor, straightening objects. At one point, they were alone in El's room whilst she phoned Hopper to let him know she wasn't dead.

`You know, you were pretty brave, Wheeler,' Max told him as she tipped another load of glass into the bin.

`How was I brave?'

`You only climbed up that fire escape to make sure El was okay.' Max's shrewd eyes looked him up and down. `I reckon you could have run away if you wanted. But you didn't.'

Surprised at the compliment, Mike could only blink and stammer like some sort of goldfish.

`Okay, don't blow a circuit,' Max said impatiently. `I'm sure I'll go back to thinking you're a nerd of epic proportions tomorrow.'

`Er- thanks. I think.'

`No problem.' And with that, the conversation was clearly over. Mike touched his ear. The blood had clotted, leaving a raised bump. He went into the living room to see if El was done with the phone.

`Yeah, that's a good idea-' she was saying as he came in. El lifted one finger, telling Mike how long she'd be. `Okay, I'll tell them. Yes, I promise I'm safe. I love you. Bye.' El put the phone back. `Dad says you and Max shouldn't risk going back home in case the fighting starts up again. He's too busy at the station to come here so we'll be alone.'

Mike nodded. `That seems sensible. Can I use the phone?'

`Sure.'

Hopefully his mom wouldn't have seen anything on the news yet.

Unfortunately, that hope proved useless.

`Michael?' Mrs Wheeler's frantic voice came down the line, deafeningly loud. `Michael, is that you?'

`Yeah, it's me.'

Then Mrs Wheeler's voice reached such a volume Mike wouldn't have been surprised if El and Max could hear every word. He winced as she yelled down the line. `Will told me where you'd gone! Of all the irresponsible things you've *ever* done, this takes the cake! This is even worse than the time you burnt off poor Elaine Hartwell's eyebrows.'

Mike had the phone at arm's length by then. `I'm sorry.'

`So you should be! Well, at least you're safe.'

`Listen, El just rang Chief Hopper. He says we should stay here overnight and then go home. Is that okay?'

There was a frustrated huff from the other end of the line. Mike held his breath before the verdict came. `I suppose that's sensible. But you are *grounded*, Michael. No arcade, no friends, and I'm putting a ban on the phone for three days. Understand?'

`Yeah.'

`Okay. I love you.' Mike thought she had a lot of nerve saying that right after all the sanctions. Then he thought about what it would have been like if he'd died in the riot.

`I love you too. Bye.' And he hung up. `Max, wanna use the phone?' Mike hollered.

`No, Neil and Mom know where I am. Anyway, are you kidding? They'd be dissapointed to know I survived.' Max withdrew her head from around the door.

Eventually, the apartment was cleaned up. Mike was sleeping in his clothes on the sofa. El brought out a pillow and duvet from underneath Hopper's bed.

`Here,' she said shyly, holding them out. Maybe it was the prospect of him sleeping overnight. Especially seeing as El had fantasised on more than one occasion what it would be like to have Mike kiss her anywhere *other* than her lips. `They're a bit lumpy. Just hit them a few times.'

`Okay. Thanks.' Mike took them, holding the bundle to his chest like it was a child. `Night.'

`Night.' El walked back into her room, where her and Max were sharing the bed. Neither of them were expecting to get much sleep.

Wind whistled outside.

A tarry, black sky was spread out above Chicago. Mike stared at it through the window, unable to sleep. Dawn was still a good four or five hours away.

Mike squirmed about underneath the duvet. El hadn't been exaggerating about the lumpiness; he gave the pillow another thump but it didn't seem to help.

In the eerie, half-light, El's apartment was transformed. Every surface looked silver. Mike thought about El, only a few feet away. He imagined her standing in the kitchen, chopping the onions for their disastrous tuna rice. Or crouching next to him as he fixed the TV and radio, like a curious little cat.

And then she really was there.

Mike blinked a few times to check he wasn't still daydreaming. No. El was in the middle of the apartment, watching him with quiet eyes, arms crossed over her band T-Shirt.

`Can't sleep?' She asked, tucking her hair behind her ears.

`No.' Mike sat up on the couch. `I keep expecting something horrible

to happen again.'

'Me too.' El was quiet for a second. 'You know, I have a way of feeling better if something scary happens here.'

'Okay,' Mike said. 'What?'

'I go onto the roof. You just feel so- above it all up there.' El shuffled her feet. 'Is that stupid?'

'No.' Mike knotted his hands together in his lap. 'Can we go there?'

So that was how the two of them ended up climbing the rickety fire escape trawling up the side of El's apartment building. Mike had one hand curled tightly around the cold banister, whilst his other hand was occupied with two blankets. El walked on ahead, carrying pillows. Goosebumps stood out on her arms.

They walked out onto the roof, satellites all around them. Mike revolved slowly on the spot, taking it all in. The sky didn't seem tarry anymore. It seemed deep and infinite and beautiful.

'This is the best spot,' El called over to him, setting down her armful. Mike helped make a little nest of blankets and pillows, and then quickly climbed underneath, shivering. El curled up against him.

'Cold,' she said, teeth chattering. Hesitantly, checking that she was okay with it, Mike put a warm arm around her shoulders. She relaxed into him.

Neither of them spoke for a while.

At some point, they lay down and Mike and El stared up at the night sky. Stars flickered down at them, and the moon softly glowed.

'A night flight,' El whispered, pointing up at the plane making its way through the air.

Slowly, dawn came, the skyscrapers of Chicago outlined against the grey-blue acrylic sky. Mike and El couldn't see it.

They were curled up underneath the blankets, foreheads pressed

together, fast asleep.

9. Chapter Nine: Textbooks and Matchsticks

9

Beep-beep-beep-

Mike sat bolt upright, staring, horrified, at his watch. It was 7:30.

`El?' He whispered, touching her shoulder. Then- `El'

`Huh? What's happening?' She mumbled, rubbing her eyes. Mike showed her his watch. `Oh, *shit-*

`We've got to go back down-'

`Leave the blankets-'

Mike and El scrambled back down the fire escape, cars already zooming about in the street below. Horns honked in the distance.

They got back down to apartment 24B. El pushed Mike through first, then clambered in herself. Her foot caught on the windowsill and she flopped onto the floor like a dead fish. Slowly, she raised her eyes up.

Max waited at the kitchen counter, stirring coffee. She looked down at El, spread-eagled on the floor, and smirked. `Morning.'

`I'm just- er- I'll just-' Mike stammered. `I've got to brush my teeth.' He bolted into the bathroom, almost tripping over the TV set because he wasn't looking where he was going.

Max sighed after him, eyebrows arched. `I wonder how he'll brush his teeth with no brush. And as for you-' she walked over to El, who was cringing. `What happened?'

`Nothing,' El said defensively. `Neither of us could sleep so we just went up on the roof.'

Max's eyebrows disappeared into her hairline. She took a loud sip of her coffee.

`I swear!'

`Alright.' Max put the coffee back on the kitchen counter. `But there's something I wanted to go over with you. Did Hop have *the talk* with you?'

`Oh my-' El covered her ears.

`It's just, I would feel responsible if you ended up producing a mini-Wheeler,' Max said loudly, obviously relishing every moment.

`I will kill you.'

`Does he have an STD record?'

`I will bash you over the head with the TV. *Repeatedly.*'

`And haven't you heard what happens if you improperly use a-'

With that, El shut herself in the bedroom and considered her life choices.

Once the initial crippling embarrassment was over, Mike, El and Max were all fairly pleasant to one another. They waited in the living room, Max packed up and ready to go.

Every time a car drove by, El leapt up from her seat like it had suddenly sprouted porcupine quills, ran to the window, checked outside, and then she would slink back to her chair. Max and Mike made several failed attempts to draw her into conversation.

Eventually they gave up, and just chatted to each other.

Somehow, they had got to arguing about Trix cereal when El jumped up from her chair, checked out of the window, made an odd squealing sound, and then went bounding down the stairs.

`Should we go after her?' Mike asked, peering down the now-empty corridor.

`Nah. Actually, you should probably hide. Hopper can be a little... intimidating if you don't know him well.'

Mike gulped.

A few seconds later, El returned. Next to her was a bear-like man, with a fedora and a *very* visible gun. Chief Hopper. And he wasn't looking happy.

`So you're Mike,' he growled.

`Yes... '

`And you're the one who stayed the night at my daughter's.' Hopper pushed his thumbs through the loops of his belt.

`Well, I slept on the sofa.'

`Did I ask you to talk back to me?'

For some insane reason, El looked like she was trying to suppress a *smile*.

That was when Mike had what felt like a minor aneurysm and began to gabble in an endless stream of word-vomit. `You were speaking so I thought I should probably reply, and I promise you that I was completely proper about it and slept on the sofa, also I heard Max giving El a safe sex talk earlier and-'

`Kid, calm down. I was messing with you.' Hopper stopped looking scary and started looking suspicious. `What's this about a *talk*, Mayfield?'

Max looked very pleased with herself. `Just thought they could benefit from it.'

She glanced at Mike and El, and gave them a quick wink. It was only a small flutter of eyelid that could easily be mistaken for a nervous tic, but Mike and El understood.

Max wasn't going to tell Hopper about the roof.

An hour later, Mrs Wheeler's sensible beige car drew up outside the apartment.

Mike almost collapsed with relief; he'd spent the last half-hour tormenting himself with various scenarios of how his mom could die coming to pick him up.

`Thanks for letting me stay,' he said to Hopper.

`No problem.' Hopper turned around, firmly facing the wall. Mike correctly interpreted this as *`Say goodbye to my kid however you want and I'll pretend to know nothing.'*

`See you, Madmax.'

`Bye, Wheeler.' Max punched him on the arm. Mike knew what she meant, and grinned at her.

Then he turned to El, who was looking slightly nervous in her old band T-Shirt. Her hands were doing a weird, twisting thing.

`I don't know if school's gonna be open today, so I'll see you-whenever?'

`Yeah.' El stepped forward and gave him a quick kiss on his cheek. The walls of the flat seemed suddenly blurry, and then El moved back. Everything returned to normal. *`See you whenever.'*

Mike stammered something out, started towards the door, completely missed the opening and banged into the doorframe.

Eventually, he managed to co-ordinate himself enough to leave the apartment. Mike really should have been feeling embarrassed for that spectacle at the end.

But a smile was spreading across his face that was so wide it was hurting his cheeks.

The spot where El had kissed him seemed hyper-sensitive. Mike touched it.

`Whatchoo smilin' at?'

Mike jumped three feet into the air.

A man was watching him from the shadows of the stairwell. A strong, pervasive stink of marijuana hung fuggily around him.

Suddenly, Mike's mind flashed back to what El had told him weeks ago, just before they'd found Georgie Steiner.

`Is your name... Earl?'

Earl looked taken aback. `How'd you know my name?'

`Someone told me.'

`Yeah, I'm Earl. An' whatchoo smilin' at? Never answered.'

`Uh-' Mike began to grin like an idiot again. `My crush kissed me.'

`Where?'

`Here.' He pointed to the spot on his cheekbone, just over his freckles.

`She likes you.' Earl lit up another cigarette. Mike could only imagine it's contents. `You go get her, man.' With a cloud of smoke obscuring his face, Earl clapped Mike on the shoulders, did the sign of a cross on his forehead, and then stumbled away, out of the doors and down the street.

Confusion swirled about Mike's head. Then he remembered why he'd gone down the stairwell in the first place and pushed open the door, leaving El's apartment block.

`Mike, thank goodness you're safe,' sighed Mrs Wheeler, reaching out to squeeze Mike's hand as he climbed into the passenger seat. `I would have come out to get you, but... we are west. I'm fairly sure I saw a young man on cannabis walk by.'

`Oh, yeah. That's Earl.' Mike buckled up. `Can we go home?'

Mrs Wheeler said nothing for a moment, and simply stared, blinking, at her son, who somehow knew a stoner.

And then she snapped out of it, and pulled away from the curb.

In Hopper's apartment, Max had been waiting for two hours for someone to pick her up.

`Do you want me to drop you back?' Hopper asked finally.

Max's voice sounded a little funny. `I hoped Mom would be here by now.'

`She's probably working.'

`Yeah. Working.' Max stood up and pulled on her hoodie. `El, wanna come? School's shut, so you won't be missing anything.'

`Stay,' Hopper ordered immediately. El hovered in the middle, her jacket half on and half off. Then she meekly returned to the couch.

Max gave Hopper an odd look, but decided to go with it. She got into his battered police car, and Hopper drove off.

`I want to talk to you about something,' he said.

Uncharacteristic worry wormed about in Max's stomach. `Talk to me about what?'

In answer, Hopper pulled up Max's sleeve. Bruises trailed up her forearm, ending at her elbow.

Max yanked her arm back, heart pounding. She tugged her sleeves down again. Sadness filled Hopper's eyes.

`Kid, I wish you could stay with me and El. We just don't have room. And we're moving in four days.'

Hard breaths came out of Max's nose. Her hands shook uncontrollably in her lap. `Last night was the scariest thing I've ever gone through. I could hear everyone dying. And I probably sit next to their killers in my lessons.'

Hopper wasn't sure how to reply to that.

`And if I can get through that, I can survive my step-dad. Me and my family are gonna have a long talk.'

Hopper left west Chicago and arrived at the small half shanty-town, half suburb where Max lived. His engine did the usual party-trick of coughing like a dying seal every time it went over a pothole.

And Jesus, did Max's road have a lot of potholes.

They pulled up at Neil Hargrove's house. Hopper cut the engine, then twisted in his seat to look at Max properly.

`Are you sure you're gonna be okay?'

`Yeah. I'll be fine.' Max opened the door and climbed out. She waved at Hopper from her doorstep. Hopper honked in reply and then drove off.

If Neil Hargrove put another bruise on that girl, he'd find himself with a gun jammed in a very undesirable spot.

But there was a little voice in Hopper's head reminding him that if Max said she could take care of herself, she could take care of herself.

School was cancelled for two days.

All in all, there were ten deaths. Sanders read their names off a little piece of paper, then put it back into his pocket and out of his mind. Troy no longer went to the school. He was in prison, awaiting trial. No one had come to get him out on bail. Hopper passed all this information onto El.

On Thursday, they were curled up together on the sofa. Sprinkles fell from the donuts Hopper was eating. El was next to him, reading *Pride and Prejudice*.

`Dad, can I ask you something?' She said suddenly, closing the book and putting it in her lap. `How would you ask someone out? Hypothetically.'

Hopper gagged on his donut and inadvertently sprayed crumbs all over the living room. `Why do you want to know?' He choked, banging his chest.

`There's got to be a better way of doing it than telling your crush you hate their entire family.' El held up *Pride and Prejudice*. `Anyway, like I said. *Hypothetically*.'

`Well, hypothetically, I'd-' Hopper thought of how he'd asked out girls in the past, and winced. `I'd send them flowers or something. Or write them a letter.'

`Bit unoriginal.'

`This isn't exactly my area of expertise, okay? Anyway, aren't you a bit young to be thinking about this? You're only-' Hopper did a quick mental scan. `Fifteen.'

`That's more than old enough to be thinking about this. Technically, I could get married at this age with your permission.' El picked up the book and started reading again.

Hopper paused, sensing that the conversation shouldn't end there. `Are you going to ask someone out?'

There was a rustle as El turned over another page, keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the book. `What if I am?'

`You're getting to the age where you'll want to- do things- with boys. We *have* had a talk about this subject, haven't we?'

El groaned loudly. `Dad, you gave me that stupid book to read. We're fine. No need to discuss anything.'

`Good. Just checking.' He paused. `This isn't about Wheeler, is it?'

Brief silence. Then- `Maybe.'

`I'm not sure about you leaving the apartment right now.'

`Wait, why not?' El looked scandalised.

`It could still be dangerous. Keep your head down for a few days. Or at least until school starts again.'

Hopper watched as a furious, but completely silent, battle waged war

over El's face.

`Okay,' she said eventually. `I won't go out.'

Suspicious, Hopper watched her sideways. `You won't go out for any reason?'

`Not unless something's on fire.' A bland, complicit expression had taken over the wild range of emotion. She looked like butter wouldn't melt, and Hopper didn't trust it an inch.

Maybe he should give her benefit of the doubt for a while and see what happened.

So that was what he did.

Back in her room, El slid *Pride and Prejudice* back into her bookshelf. How to ask Mike out to the dance?

Her eyes fell on the English textbook she'd inadvertently stuffed into her satchel all those weeks ago. The book she'd pulled out at exactly the right second on exactly the right day to see Mike Wheeler on the other side of that bookshelf.

Yeah. That would do just fine.

El grabbed a marker off the clutter on her desk and uncapped it with a click. Holding the lid between her teeth, El quickly wrote her question on the middle page. Then she bent the spine backwards so when opened, the book would immediately fall open to that page.

Guilt wriggled about unpleasantly in the pit of El's stomach. She felt terrible breaking her promise to Hop, but then again, the dance was tomorrow. It wasn't like she had *options*, especially seeing as school might not even open the next day. Well...

Maybe she didn't have to break her promise. El had a box of matches in her desk drawer in case of a power cut. She struck a match, held it to a scrap of paper, and let it catch. The flame leapt along the edge, blackened the paper, and it began to curl in on itself, as if in pain. El

quickly blew it out.

There, she thought determinedly. Didn't break my promise.

El clasped the book tightly to her chest. She opened the window, still holding the singed, smoking paper. A gust of wind suddenly wrenched it from her grasp. The blackened scrap whirled in the air, flakes of ash falling off it like black snowflakes. Higher, higher, higher. El watched it float upward, eyes squinted against the sun, smiling at it for no reason she could understand.

And then a particularly strong breeze whipped it over a wall, and out of sight. El stared at where it had been, then snapped herself out of it, and made her way down the ladder. Silently, she jumped down into the alley, landing lightly on her dirty sneakers.

As quietly as possible, El crept out into the street, and began to run.

Twenty minutes later, she reached her destination. Anxiety was ramping up in El's chest. She told it to shut up and rang the doorbell.

A woman opened the door, with carefully curled hair that fell over her shoulders.

'Hello,' said El nervously. 'I'm here to see Mike. Is he in?'

'Yes, he is,' Mrs Wheeler answered. 'Are you El?'

'Yeah, El Hopper.'

'Right- well, just come through to the living room. I'll get him.'

Painfully aware of her grubby punk clothes, El sat down in the prim living room. She hoped that she didn't leave any grease smears on the pristine furniture. Almost threateningly, a clock ticked on the mantelpiece, reminding her she only had a limited amount of time before Hopper got suspicious and came looking. Without a doubt, he'd beeline to the Wheelers' house.

To distract herself, El looked at the plethora of photos clustered about the clock. There was one of Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Will, all dressed up as the Ghostbusters. Next to them was a teenage girl, who El could only assume was Nancy. She was pretty.

The one that made El smile the most was a baby picture of Mike, with him grinning toothily at the camera, hair all over his face. He looked about three.

Then voices came down the corridor.

'Mom, for the last time, we don't need you to chaperone-'

'I just don't want you two going up to your room-'

'I never suggested we would!'

'That's good. But I would prefer it if I could check in every now and then.'

Believe me when I say, *you don't need to.*'

'Oh, my little boy getting his first girlfriend!'

El *isn't* my girlfri-' Mike entered the room. 'Hi, El.' His hair was damp, plastered to his forehead and neck in licks and curls.

'Sorry, were you having a shower?' El's resolve was quickly disintegrating. 'I can come back later.'

'No, it's fine. Don't worry.' Mike flicked a warning look at his mom, who sighed, then left. 'What did you need?'

'I just wanted to give you a book.' El got up off the sofa, walked over to him. 'Here.' She held it out.

Confused, Mike looked down at the book then up at her.

That was when Hopper's car pulled up. Both kids whipped round to the open window. With a face of thunder Hopper stormed out of the car and up the drive. El swore quietly.

'Quick, take it,' she said, and pushed it into Mike's hands just as the doorbell went.

Twenty seconds later El was craning her neck for a last look at Mike as she was frogmarched away, Hopper firmly steering her towards the car. He watched from the doorway, holding the book to his chest.

And then Hopper was pushing her into the back seat, slamming the door, and revving the engine.

He sped away down the road.

El lost sight of Mike in seconds.

Hopper told her exactly why it was unacceptable for her to sneak out, and why it was a total breach of trust. The words washed over El as she leaned back in her seat with her eyes closed, a smile dancing on her lips.

Mike lay on his bed, staring up at the luminous stars on his ceiling until his eyes ached.

Why had El given him the book?

Mike knew her well enough to take a guess.

El was shy. She wouldn't have wanted to do anything face-to-face. So that meant something she was too shy to say to Mike personally was in the book.

Mike sat up and caught the book as it slid off his torso. He held it in his hands, and immediately, without him touching it, the book fell open to the middle page.

A smile broke out across Mike's face.

In El's messy, wild handwriting was a single word, a single question.

Dance?

Mike could have jumped around the room like a maniac, but forced himself to stay still. He walked over to his desk, where there was one remaining sheet of El's origami paper. Mike pulled out the chair, sat down, and attempted to crack his knuckles. It didn't work, but that was unimportant.

The final sheet was a beautiful, vibrant orange-red. Mike wrote his answer on the inside of the paper and quickly folded it into his last

box tulip.

On Friday, the school re-opened.

So many students were missing. Every class had an empty seat.

But there was still a sense of peace. The graffiti had been cleaned off the lockers. The factions no longer existed at recess. A memorial was set up in the school playing field, for Josh, for Georgie, for Jennifer and all the others.

Mike craned his neck, looking for El.

Max caught his eye. 'She's not here.' Max herself was sat very close to Lucas, who was looking both thrilled and scared.

'Then where is she?' The box tulip was clutched in Mike's hand, which was becoming clammier with every passing second.

'Have you checked the cupboard?' Will suggested.

'No. But I don't think she'll be there.' Mike knew that El not being here was some sort of invitation for him to speak to her privately. But *where was she?*

And then Mike suddenly clicked.

'I know where she is,' he said, standing up. 'Don't come after me.'

Mike entered the still, silent library. Dust motes swirled in the light from the high windows, disturbed as he walked past.

The bookcase was there.

Mike looked through the empty gap El's book left.

A warm, hazel eye blinked back at him.

No words needed to be spoken. They could see each other through the gap. Mike knew what El was thinking, just from the subtle changes in her expression.

Never had Mike wanted to kiss someone more than he wanted to kiss El.

Instead, he passed the box tulip through the thin space in the bookcase. His mouth was dry as she took it, unfolded it, and read his answer.

'I was hoping you'd say that,' she whispered. She rested her hand on the bookcase. Mike reached out and touched her hand through the gap. They only had enough space to brush fingertips.

But it was enough.

10. Chapter Ten: Rainbow Icing, Starry Skies

10

School went by in a flash, an unprecedented phenomenon.

Mike and El were hoping to talk to each other after school- seeing as the dance was in *five hours*- but both were pulled in separate directions by their friends.

`El, we need to get you a dress,' Max said firmly.

`But I-'

`There's no point talking to Wheeler. If you don't get something to wear in the next five hours you can't show up to the dance at all.'

El couldn't argue with the truth in that. She let herself be pulled along by Max towards the shops in the centre of Chicago.

`Wait!' She said, stopping dead. `What about money?'

Max fished a few notes out of her pocket. `Got it covered. Me and the others came fully prepared today. Lucas brought some money for Mike and I got this for you.'

El was touched. `You didn't need to do that!'

`Consider it redemption for starting a betting pool.'

`What?'

`Doesn't matter, come *on!*' Max grabbed El's hand and pulled her into the swanky department store.

First, they went to the prom section of the shop. El blinked at all the dresses. Some of them were slim and tasteful, whilst others would undoubtedly make the wearer look like a puffball mushroom.

`Wow.' El unsteadily walked through the rails and mannequins, taking in the colours, the satin material. If there was a goth dress

somewhere in this section, it would be *perfect*.

Unfortunately, that seemed unlikely.

First minutes, then hours passed as El waded through the rails, occasionally holding a dress up for inspection. Max would either give it a thumbs up if she thought it had potential, or make a gagging noise.

She ended up gagging quite a bit.

As El discarded another pink taffeta-explosion, she twisted around to look at Max, who had slumped back in her chair.

`*Bored*,' Max groaned at El, in an elongated zombie voice.

`Why not come up here? You've not looked through anything.'

`Yeah... I think I'm gonna skip the dance.' Max started to chew one of her chipped nails like she hadn't said something that was a *pretty big deal*.

`You can't skip!' El gasped, *way* louder than she'd intended. `You said you'd dance with Lucas.'

`Can you imagine me wearing any of this stuff?' Max gestured to the sea of net and tulle around her ankles. `No way. I'm gonna stay at home and eat cheese in my pajamas.'

El was about to start arguing when something caught her eye. Right at the back of one of the rails was a blot of black in amongst the pink and white. Intrigued, El reached through all the dresses for it and pulled it out.

She gasped.

It was the most beautiful dress she'd ever seen.

It had no sleeves and was the same shade as a countryside night sky. Tiny, midnight roses were stitched along the neckline, it gathered at the waist, the hem would just brush her knees.

`Oh, my God. Wear that and Wheeler's heart'll explode.'

Before she got too excited- although that ship had well and truly sailed- El checked the price tag. She blinked with surprise. It couldn't be that cheap.

`They must have put it on the wrong rail,' Max shrugged when El showed her the tag. `Now go try it on.' She shooed El into the changing rooms, then looked around the department store.

Yeah, as if *she* would wear a pink puffball dress.

Then again, it would be a shame to miss out on the end-of-year dance. Whilst El changed behind a curtain, Max wandered off into the boy's section. Plenty of suits there. Maybe *that* could be an option.

Max ran her hand over the clothes, the hangers clicking together noisily.

She stopped at a light grey suit. A black tie was draped next to it. Max considered it for a moment, picturing herself.

Then grabbed it off the rail and held it up to her chin.

Max smiled at her reflection. *Damn*, she looked good. Max half ran back to the changing rooms, then stopped dead at the sight of El.

`How do I look?' She asked nervously, twirling experimentally. The black skirt flared out. Max grinned.

`You look amazing.'

`Have you finished yet?'

`No!' Mike yelled back, wriggling into the painfully tight blazer. `Are you sure you got the right size?'

`Well- I could have misread a zero for a nine.'

Mike yanked back the curtain and stepped out of the changing cubicle, barely able to breathe. He felt like a large, rubber sleeve was

squeezing him around the middle. 'Yeah, no shit.'

Dustin sheepishly handed Mike a correctly-sized suit. Mike went back into the cubicle and started to struggle out of the jacket. Unwelcome thoughts began jockeying for his attention.

Would he and El kiss?

If so, how would he know? Would she give him some sort of *signal*? Oh, God. What if he was a bad kisser?

What if he somehow screwed it all up?

Mike managed to wrench off the jacket, threw it in the corner, and groaned.

The night would either go really well, or really, really badly.

In the other cubicles, Lucas and Will were trying on their own dance clothes. Lucas was admiring himself in a dashing white suit, and rehearsing what he'd say to Max to ask her to dance. Maybe he wouldn't even say a thing and simply whirl her off her feet.

Then again, if that was the method he chose there was a two in three chance she'd punch him.

In the third cubicle, Will tugged the hem of his jacket. He didn't like it much.

'Dustin, can you pass me the waistcoat?'

Dustin rolled his eyes, grabbed the waistcoat next to him and threw it over the top of the cubicle. Will's hand shot upwards and caught it.

'Thanks!' Will discarded the jacket and put on the waistcoat, and smiled at his reflection.

Will didn't have a *date* as such, but that probably wouldn't matter. Neither did Dustin, even though his suit had been planned for months. They could probably chat about X-Men or something in the corner.

Simultaneously, Mike, Lucas and Will all stepped out of the changing

rooms, looking at each other.

`Ladies, watch out,' Lucas said smugly, tugging at his cuffs. `The AV Club is coming tonight.' (With some difficulty, Dustin managed to restrain himself from saying all the wisecracks that popped into his head with that sentence.)

Will was in a waistcoat with two pockets, and couldn't stop admiring the pale blue bow tie. He'd managed to knot it after Mike yelled instructions to him from the other cubicle.

Lucas was in a white suit and polished black shoes.

Mike was in a black suit that set off his dark hair magnificently. He looked in the mirror, and a small flame of pride sparked in his chest. He actually looked- *good*.

What would El be wearing?

And with that the panic came whooshing back.

`Dustin, why can't we see your outfit yet?' Will asked curiously. Dustin grinned, and tapped the side of his nose.

Half an hour to go.

Nervous energy burned through El as she dragged the straighteners through another lock of hair.

`Why are you doing that?' Max asked as she adjusted the tie on her suit.

`I've always wanted to straighten my hair,' El replied determinedly, yanking at the tongs. `Might as well do it tonight.' Another yank, a soft *oof*. `But I'm not sure if it's worth the struggle. Maybe it would be easier to iron it.'

Max sat down on the bed next to El. `Give it to me, you've missed loads round the back.' She took the hot irons out of El's hands and started to pull them through the hair at the back.

`Max, what if Mike kisses me?'

`Keep your voice down! Hopper'll have a stroke if he hears you.'

`Okay, but *what if?*'

Max sighed. `Do you want Mike to kiss you?' She asked simply.

`Yeah!' El realised that came out a little too enthusiastic. `I mean, sure. No biggie.' Oh, God, that was *worse*.

`If you want Mike to kiss you, it'll be fine. Or you know what, break tradition and kiss *him*. Just stop panicking, you'll sweat through your dress. Is my tie okay?'

El twisted round to look. `Your tie's fine.' And then El spontaneously hugged her friend, who made a small *oh!* noise. `Thank you,' she whispered into Max's auburn hair. *Thank you for being my friend. Thank you for being here. Thank you so, so much.*

`Shut up, you'll make me cry.' But Max hugged El back, before picking up the straighteners and resumed sorting out El's hair.

A knock sounded on the door. `Come in,' Max and El said in unison. Hopper looked around the door.

`Are you ready yet?'

`Hang on-' Max yanked sharply downwards.

`Ow!'

`Yeah, we're done.'

`Thanks,' El gasped, eyes watering. Strands of hair gently tickled her exposed shoulders.

Hopper jiggled his car keys. `So we can go?' El exchanged a look with Max. Then suddenly jumped up off the bed.

`Can I talk to you?' Without waiting for an answer, El pulled Hopper out of the room and into the kitchen. All over the walls, there were grey pencil marks, each made on El's birthday. How could they leave the beautiful apartment behind? The cigarette burns, regular mice

invasions and Unidentified Stains gave it *character*. Hopper and most visitors didn't see it that way, but El knew otherwise.

She took a deep breath. 'Dad, why do we still have to move? Troy and Dallas aren't around anymore. We're *safe*. It doesn't make sense to travel three hours away when there's no threat anymore *here*.' El tightened her already clasped hands. 'There's more chance of us dying on the car trip than dying in Chicago.'

Hopper sighed, and leaned against the fridge, and pulled his hand over his scruff of beard. 'You wouldn't understand,' he said.

'*Then explain it to me.*'

Hopper couldn't bring himself to look at his daughter's determined, pale face.

What *could* he say?

She was right.

'I'll check the contract,' he eventually muttered. 'I'll check the contract, then we'll see.'

El's face lit up.

'I said we'll *see*. That wasn't a yes.'

The words went straight over El's head. Beaming, she hugged him tightly round the middle, then skipped back into her room.

Hopper shook his head after her, then opened a drawer. Inside was a sheaf of smarmy, official-looking papers. He lifted them out, and began to read.

Five minutes later Max and El were getting into Hopper's car. Max kept on undoing her tie and then knotting it up again. The seventh time she did this El confiscated the tie by sitting on it.

'Calm down,' El instructed Max, who was looking extremely pale. 'You'll be fine.'

`Do you think I should have asked Lucas sooner?'

`Well, maybe. But it won't matter. Whenever he's around you he looks like Bambi on cocaine.'

Max snorted, and started to look a little better. El returned the tie once Hopper pulled up in front of the school. They were late, so music was already blaring inside the hall.

Hopper twisted round in his seat to look at Max and El.

`Stay safe, say no if someone offers you drugs-'

`Dad, we're going to a *school dance*-'

`And if Wheeler does anything you're not comfortable with you have full jurisdiction to punch him in the face.'

El hid a smile. `I'll bear that in mind.' She hopped out of the car, closely followed by Max.

They faced the door, where a few bored-looking teachers were handing out wristbands.

And then Max and El walked in.

Michael Jackson blared from the speakers so loudly it was giving Mike a headache. Next to him, Lucas was obsessively scrubbing at a tiny smear of dirt on his white trousers.

`Lucas, stop panicking,' Will said. `It's barely noticeable.'

`Shut up, I'm concentrating...'

The dance had started twenty minutes ago.

Where was El and Max and Dustin? All of them were missing.

Students swarmed about the room in patterns and established rhythms. They were dancing, loading up plates with cupcakes, sipping at fruit punch or the soft drinks provided. At the edge of the

dance floor, even Jess Landey bobbed about to the rhythm from the waist up, sitting in her wheelchair. Every once in a while she took a bite out of the cookie she was holding. She had two crimson hairclips keeping her soot-black hair out of her eyes.

Mike turned round to Lucas. 'Have you seen Dustin?'

'No, I-' Will and Lucas suddenly went very, very pale.

'What?'

'Found him,' Will said in an extremely small voice.

With sinking feeling, Mike looked back in the right direction. In an electric blue suit, Dustin swaggered to their table, and his hair...

'Holy shit, what happened to you?'

Dustin smoothed back his hair. It looked like a bird's nest. A bird's nest for an extremely restless eagle. 'You like it? Farrah Fawcett spray. Steve Harrington told me.'

'That guy who used to date my sister?'

'Yep. I phoned him and asked him how he did his hair before he went to college. Turns out the trick is using four puffs of Farrah Fawcett spray when it's damp.'

Luckily, before anyone could say anything more two latecomers walked in.

Mike's breath involuntarily hitched, and he stood up.

El looked nervously around the hall, picking at her hangnail. One of the red wristbands they were giving out at the entrance was tied around her slim wrist.

Mike and El caught each other's eyes across the crowded room.

Skirt swinging from side to side, El made her way to Mike, dodging around the dancers. Her ankles wobbled slightly in the short heels she wore.

`Hello,' she whispered, so only Mike could hear her. `You look really good.'

`You look beautiful.' Mike wondered if he'd drunk his cup of Coke too fast; bubbles were popping in his stomach.

Unfortunately, the moment was somewhat ruined by Dustin jumping on El screaming *`Oh my God you can't do that to Mike! His little heart will explode!'*

El laughed giddily, thinking of Max's almost identical comment as Dustin gave her a quick twirl.

`Shouldn't have let Dustin near the cupcakes,' Max smiled, looking on the scene.

`Hey, Madmax,' Lucas said confidently, despite the sheen of nervous sweat on his forehead. `Nice suit.'

`Same to you, Sinclair.' She was looking particularly dashing in a light grey suit. A silver scrunchie held her hair in a high ponytail.

The Michael Jackson song finished. The record squealed slightly as the DJ took it out, then replaced it with something else.

A stomp stomp *clap* echoed out across the hall. El let out a gasp of delight, grabbed Mike's hand (like it didn't make electricity jolt straight up his arm) and pulled him onto the dance floor, closely followed by the others. They stood in a line.

`I've always wanted to do this,' Will said gleefully.

A lot of different people were staring at them.

Not one of them cared.

Dustin was stamping and clapping so enthusiastically a little of his elaborate hairstyle collapsed.

`Buddy, you're a boy, make a big noise, playin' in the street, gonna be a big *man some day*, you got mud on yo' face, big dis-grace, kicking your can all over the place!' They sang, clapping loudly on the last

syllable.

`We will, we will rock you!' Mike's head nodded to the beat. `We will, we will *rock you!*'

When the song ended El was certain the `weirdo' status they all carried had been updated to `crazy'.

This thought was expelled when the next song came on.

`Twist and Shout!' Lucas yelled excitedly. `Just like in the diner!'

The second the lyrics began their careful choreography completely collapsed. Lucas and Max were half dancing together, half not, occasionally turning away to dance with the others. They were all doing that; dancing with one partner for a few seconds, then whirling away to a new one. It was like an elaborate, ever-evolving web.

Mike danced/ jumped to the rhythm with Will, arms and legs going everywhere. He was so out of breath he stopped for a second. Everyone around the group had moved away two feet, just to avoid injury.

El was dancing wildly, swaying and spinning on the spot, head tilted back and eyes laughing.

Mike was suddenly taken over by a reckless flush of courage.

As the song came close to ending, he caught El mid-spin, managed to keep her still, bent his head and kissed her full on the mouth.

It was rather like being plunged into a warm bath; El didn't react for a second, completely shocked. Then she tilted herself up on tiptoe to return the kiss. Her hands rested on his shoulders. His mouth was so warm...

John Lennon's rusty vocals faded away, and the record stopped.

El and Mike broke apart, staring at each other.

No one was watching them. Their friends were still dancing with

each other. So El pulled Mike in the direction of the exit, and the two of them ran out into the dark corridor. They were completely alone.

This time she kissed *him*. It was no less dizzying.

`Do you want to go outside?' Mike whispered. El nodded, wondering where they were going.

There was just something *about* school at night. White moonlight shone off the linoleum, such a change from the usual harsh sun.

Mike pushed open a fire exit and El realised where they were headed; the hill at the back of the school.

They were out of breath by the time they'd run up to it's summit.

El kicked off her heels. Even though they were only three centimetres high they were rubbing her ankles raw. She curled her bare feet into the grass. The ground throbbed with the rhythm of the distant music.

To a parent standing in the car park, waiting for their child, Mike and El would have been nothing more than two silhouettes in profile. Two black figures against a midnight backdrop.

Mike looked down at El, holding her gaze, her breathless face. He held her waist, and she brought her hands up to the back of his neck. Shivers erupted down his spine.

`I like your freckles,' El whispered to him, brushing her thumb along his cheekbone.

This time Mike didn't kiss her mouth, he kissed the tip of her round nose, and her forehead and her closed eyelids. He finally got his wish and ran his fingers through her hair, over and over again.

El made a quiet, happy little sigh, placed her warm hands on either side of his face, and pressed her mouth to his.

Now that was three kisses. She'd taken three kisses from Mike and he'd taken three from her, and neither of them thought they could ever get tired of it.

They stood swaying, intertwined, on the hilltop for an impossibly long time.

Eventually, they had to break apart, both dizzy from either love or lack of oxygen. El's face was flushed. She looked up at Mike.

'We should get back before they start writing steamy fanfiction about us.'

Mike burst out laughing. 'Good idea.' El retrieved her shoes. They dangled from her fingertips as her and Mike made their way back down to the school. Above them, the stars smiled.

'Wait-' El put her hand on Mike's arm to stop him. 'Who's that?'

Two figures ran out of the school, and then came to a stop in the car park.

'Is that-'

'Oh my God, it is.'

Max and Lucas were kissing against a stranger's Fiat Panda. Neither of them had noticed Mike and El, who were now clamping their hands over their mouths to stifle the giggles.

They returned to the hall.

'Hey. Will, right?' Will jumped. A little fruit punch spilled from his pressed-together lips onto his bow tie. He turned around, and Jess Landey was watching him, her eyebrows peaked.

Him and Dustin were sat at a table, paper plates of food in front of them. Their other friends were currently AWOL. Dustin looked at Will, who was clearly so surprised at an actual girl acknowledging him he'd temporarily forgotten how to speak.

Jess gave an angry huff and started to wheel away.

Dustin kicked Will sharply on the shin. He snapped out of it.

`Wait!' Will called. Jess stopped. `I'm Will Byers. D-Did you want to dance?'

Jess looked him up and down. `Sure.' She held out her hand. Will took it, and looked behind him. Dustin gave him a massive thumbs up.

That was when El and Mike returned.

`Where've you two been?' Dustin demanded. Immediately the two of them went shiftier and started blushing. `Ugh! Never mind.'

`Screw you,' El answered playfully, stealing a cupcake from his plate. She was too happy to be actually mad at anyone. `Haven't you danced with anyone yet?'

`Nope. But I don't mind.' Dustin took a large gulp of soda to cover up the fact he actually did mind quite a bit.

Within seconds, El was pulling him out of his seat. `Come on,' she smiled, tugging his hand. Then she paused and glanced back at the table. `Mike?'

Mike blinked when he realised she was asking permission. `Go ahead!' He motioned towards the dance floor. `You don't need to ask.'

El beamed at him in such a way Mike was certain he experienced a minor cardiac arrest. Then she and Dustin were absorbed into the crowd.

Mike smiled after them, then helped himself to Will's loaded plate. The cookies were actually pretty good.

`Hi.' Max pulled back a chair and collapsed into it. `Where's El?'

`Dancing with Dustin.' Mike eyed her. She was extremely flushed, and her hair had come out of its ponytail. It was now suspiciously messy. He smirked down at the cookie.

Revenge.

`Where's Lucas?' He asked innocently.

Max shrugged. 'How should I know? Probably went to the restroom.'

'Probably.' They lapsed back into silence. Mike waited a little before speaking again. 'You seem pretty flushed. You feeling okay?'

'I feel fine.'

'Your hair came down.'

'I can do it up again.'

'Me and El saw you and Lucas in the car park.'

'Screw you, now and forever.' All self-control flew out of the window and Mike burst out laughing. He dropped the cookie and wheezed uncontrollably, collapsed on the table. 'So,' he eventually choked, 'can we expect a wedding invitation?'

A death look fell over Max's face, and she lobbed a rainbow-sprinkled cupcake at Mike. It sailed over his head and was immediately crushed underfoot by the dancers.

'What was that for?' El smiled, returning to the table with Dustin. After Mike relayed all events leading up to the cupcake, a mischievous grin crossed El's face.

'Do I need to have *the talk* with you?'

'Not you too!' Max thumped her head on the table in despair.

'It's just, I'd feel responsible if you produced a mini-Lucas.' El ducked as the entire plate was thrown at her head, still cackling with evil laughter.

Meanwhile, Will and Jess spun round in a circle. Their method of dancing involved Jess spinning her wheelchair whilst holding Will's hand, and both of them bobbing about to the music. The music happened to be Should I Stay or Should I Go, which only enhanced Will's good mood.

Jess Landey was actually quite nice- and *extremely* pretty.

At midnight, the six of them waited outside, shivering. Mike's jacket was draped over El's shoulders like a cape.

Silence. Then- 'So, you and Jess?' Max craned her neck to look at Will's reaction. That reaction was quite blushy.

'Don't feel embarrassed,' Mike told him, trying to counteract Max. 'I think it's nice.'

'You do?'

'Yeah!' Lucas supplied. 'And she *blatantly* had a crush on you from the beginning of the year. Didn't you notice all those *just because* presents she was giving you?'

'No!' Will answered honestly, looking completely blank. Their laughter fluttered up over the racket of cars pulling in and students bidding goodbye to their friends.

'Sometimes, your total obliviousness just blows my mind.'

Seconds later, Hopper arrived to pick up the girls. He stuck his head out of the window and beckoned them over. And when that didn't work, laid a heavy hand on the horn.

Max drew away from Lucas and El reluctantly handed back Mike's jacket. She squeezed his hand.

'Dad's watching,' she whispered. Hopefully Mike would correctly decode this as *I really do want to kiss you but my dad would either skin you alive, or have an aneurysm*.

He did. Mike nodded, and gave her hand a quick squeeze back. 'Will we ever be able to do anything whilst your dad's watching?'

'Probably not.'

Max and El climbed into the back of Hopper's car.

Hopper drove away, drinking from a thermos of coffee.

Over the course of four hours, Max and El had stuffed themselves

silly on cupcakes, biscuits and alcohol free punch. All that sugar and caffeine had kept them awake at the dance- but they hit the sugar crash in the back of Hopper's car.

The next time he looked back, Hopper saw Max and El snoring peacefully, collapsed against each other like two playing cards.

With a small shake of his head, and a slight smile, Hopper pressed down on the gas and accelerated.

He'd tell El whether they were moving or not in the morning.

Back in the high school car park, Mike watched as Hopper's taillights got smaller, and smaller, and smaller.

Until finally, they vanished.

11. Chapter Eleven: A New Beginning

Note: If you want, start listening to the seven-minute 'Arrival of the Birds' when Mike walks to El's apartment. For some reason the song worked quite well with the story.

11

Mike woke in a haze of exhaustion.

It took a while for him to untangle his dreams and reality.

The moment he remembered that he *had in fact* kissed *El Hopper*, Mike fist punched the air, still lying on his bed. He began grinning like an idiot.

There was a knock on the door, and then half a second later Mrs Wheeler walked in without waiting.

'Mom!' Yelped Mike, yanking his duvet up to his chin.

'Mike!' She mimicked in the same tone. 'Get up. It's almost midday.'

What? Mike checked the watch on his bedside table. Jeez, he'd got to sleep at one in the morning, so that meant... eleven hours. 'New record,' he mumbled, clipping his watch onto his wrist.

'Never mind if it's a new record, I want you showered and down for breakfast in ten. Or as we normal people call it, lunch.' Mrs Wheeler began to walk out of the room, then turned round. 'By the way, your girlfriend called by earlier.'

What was the point in denying it now? 'What did she say?'

'I don't know, to be honest. She was making barely any sense, but she seemed to want to see you quite urgently.'

'When was this?'

Mrs Wheeler shrugged. 'A couple of hours ago. Go and see her if you want to know what she meant.'

Once she'd gone, Mike started to get dressed, wondering what could possibly be so urgent that El needed to come at nine a.m. *Nine a.m.*, after the night they'd had!

Mike remembered El's hands resting on his shoulders and her warm breath, and how her mouth tasted of the frosting on the cupcakes.

Wow.

A hot-chocolate-type feeling settled in Mike's stomach, and stayed there all the way to El's apartment. He dawdled along the street, smiling to himself. There wasn't any need to hurry; it was the first day of vacation. Him and El had an entire summer together.

Bikes whizzed along the uneven sidewalk, tires bouncing as their riders shouted rapid-fire slang to each other. That was something he could do with El- they had weeks to do whatever they wanted. A bike ride around Chicago was definitely on his wishlist. What else?

Maybe they could go back to the diner, just the two of them. Twist and Shout certainly held a new significance for both of them.

Plans and ideas whirled about his head. Ice cream- the beach- just lying next to each other in the park-

Mike was so completely lost in his thoughts, the next time he looked up, he saw he'd arrived at El's street.

A large, white moving van was parked in front of her apartment block. Its engine hummed. Whoever was using it was almost ready to go. Mike dodged around the furniture cluttering the sidewalk, not looking at any of it properly, and entered the building. No Earl in the stairwell, but there were cardboard boxes stacked up everywhere. Mike shrugged, then started up the concrete stairs.

Mike wasn't focusing as he walked along the third-floor corridor. His eyes drifted along the scraggy carpet. There was a small mouse hole in the skirting board. Maybe he could bring round traps-

`Oof!'

Mike fell backwards, arms flailing, and landed with a thump on his

backside. Objects bounced around him like hail.

`I'm sorry, I didn't see you- Mike!'

Mike snapped out of the daze and saw El, collapsed on the carpet, same as him. The debris from the cardboard box she carried surrounded them. Mike trained his eyes on the top of the cardboard box. Someone had scribbled in messy marker pen *El Hopper. This way up.*

A look passed between them. Sudden, cold realisation hit Mike, and it was like someone had yanked his heart straight out of his chest.

`You're moving,' he said quietly. It wasn't a question.

El blinked too quickly. `I'm sorry, I- I should have told you.' There were a few seconds where Mike was just squeezing his eyes shut. He breathed deeply, and that seemed to dissolve the stone in his throat.

`Why are you moving?'

`It was because of the gang stuff.'

It was pathetic, but Mike seized onto the hope that maybe El and Hopper were *unloading* their belongings from the moving van, because they couldn't seriously be moving just *days* after Troy and Dallas ended their war...

`Dad couldn't back out of the agreement. He checked the contract before the dance, and- and told me this morning.' A glassy look seeped over El's normally bright eyes. One tear overspilled her eye, and fell down her cheek. It left a silvery trail behind. `It was all paid for and everything.' Mike knew that she wanted to say more, but couldn't.

`Don't cry,' he said, getting up and sitting down next to her. `We can phone, and write.' Luckily El couldn't see him without looking up, so Mike took the opportunity to give his eyes a quick wipe. `What's the address?'

`I can't remember the first bit, but it's a cabin in this place called Hawkins. It's in Indiana.'

`Sounds horrific.'

El gave a weak laugh, and rested her head on Mike's shoulder. He put an arm around her.

`Ahem.' A figure loomed over them. El and Mike jumped apart like they'd been given electric shocks. Hopper looked down at them, and saw the pink tinge around Mike's eyes, and the single tear track on El's cheek.

`You told him.' El nodded. A rare, regretful expression came over Hopper's face as he caught Mike's eyes. `I'm sorry, kid.'

`There's no way you can stay?' Even though Mike didn't expect Hopper to say yes, he was still crushed when the man shook his head.

`I'll leave you two alone, but we need to go in five minutes.'

Just like that, six weeks was slated down to a few precious minutes.

`I can't think of what to say.'

`It doesn't matter if you can't think of anything,' El reminded him softly. `This isn't goodbye, remember? Like you said, we can phone and write. Although maybe censor your letters. I wouldn't put it beyond Dad to read your mail to make sure you aren't desecrating my innocence.'

That did it. Mike started cracking up, and so did El. `You're crazy.'

`I'll send you my number the *second* the phone is set up. I promise.' El squeezed his hand tightly.

`I definitely liked you first,' Mike told her.

`No way.'

`Yeah, I'm certain it was me.'

`Absolutely *not*.' El poked him in the ribs playfully. They ended up devolving into giggling messes, trying to tickle each other.

There was a loud honk from the street. El looked towards the stairs.

`I need to go.' She retrieved her cardboard box, and clasped it to her chest. They walked down together. El leaned into Hopper's car and whispered something to him. He rolled his eyes, but took the cardboard box and then put his hands over his eyes.

El stood in front of Mike, chin up, eyes blazing. She seized the front of his shirt and kissed him, once, hard, on the lips.

And then she climbed into the back seat, did her seatbelt, and looked at Mike out of the window.

`I'll visit,' he promised.

`And I'll write the minute we arrive, I swear.'

The ignition growled and coughed. The car revved to life.

Urgently, Mike grabbed El's hand through the open window. Both of them were crying kind of hysterically by then.

And then Hopper peeled away from the curb. Their fingers were pulled apart. El twisted around in her seat to see the rapidly shrinking figure of Mike, who had run out into the road.

She watched him until long after he was out of sight.

Finally, El slumped back round in her seat when they reached the freeway, chin on her chest.

Hopper's eyes met hers in the rear-view mirror. `You okay?'

`Yeah,' El nodded. She wiped her eyes, and swallowed. `I'll see him again.'

Three weeks later, Karen Wheeler left Ted Wheeler in a messy, screaming row. The end result was a divorce settlement, a broken window and one spilled green bean casserole.

Mrs Wheeler stood on the sidewalk, clutching two heavy suitcases in

either hand, her teenage son and toddler daughter by her side.

With nowhere to go, no relatives to flee to, Mrs Wheeler was certain they'd end up in a hostel. Luckily, Mike had done some quick thinking and spent his pocket money on three night bus tickets.

Four hours later- the traffic was *hell*- the night bus stopped in Hawkins, Indiana. Mike half leapt down the steps, despite lugging a bulky suitcase.

Mrs Wheeler checked them all into the cheapest hotel she could find and began to plan what in God's name they should do next.

Mike knew what to do. He lay in bed feigning sleep until both Holly and Mrs Wheeler's breathing became steady and rhythmic. He left a note, and carefully unlocked the door and crept out into the night, a slip of paper clutched tight in his fist. On it was El's new address.

It took some wandering around, but eventually Mike found the cabin. It was easy enough to work out which room was El's. It was the only one with a lamp on in the window.

He gently tapped on the window and suddenly El was there, frantically unlocking the window and opening it, and pulling him inside, just like that night they were trapped in apartment 24B as the riot raged below them.

They tumbled back onto El's duvet, El falling backwards, Mike on top of her, hands framing her face. The light behind his damp hair caught every dark strand. El brushed his hair back from his face, almost unable to speak from the stone lodged in her throat.

'Stay with me,' El whispered, after a long, long while. 'Please.'

A breeze fluttered the curtains back into the room. Mike smiled down at her, softly, so softly. 'I'll stay with you.'

'Promise?' Tears were filling El's eyes- he was there, he was *with her*. She wasn't dreaming.

Neither of them knew it then, but Mike would stay the whole of that night and the next morning, and Mrs Wheeler would buy a house in

Hawkins suburbia, and they'd both attend Hawkins High School until their graduation, and it would be the best summer either of them had ever had-

But for the moment, they were happy just to be together.

Mike brushed her hair back from her face, and nodded, and whispered, 'Promise.'

12. Author's Note

Okay, I can't believe that Paper People is now over. I'll be truthful, that last chapter made me go all sniffly. The music I was listening to at the time definitely didn't help. Hopefully the ending met all expectations. Acknowledgements: Thanks to Alikattt, because they were the first person who I showed Paper People. They were extremely helpful. And thanks to everyone that favourited, followed or reviewed. It always put a massive smile on my face.

Sincerely,

Kitkat36912